

ACTS



HOW THE FIRST CHURCH GREW

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By Kathy Stewart

Introduction

I have heard that some people find the bible hard to read, so I have gone to work in rewriting the book of Acts. I would like to invite you on the amazing journey through the book of Acts where we will meet some remarkable people who have helped in building the first church.

I hope you find it encouraging. It certainly helped me grow in my faith. Read and be encouraged.

Chapter 1

Do not leave till the father has sent you what he promised. Remember John baptized with water but soon you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, the promised counsellor and guide.

While Jesus ministered here on earth his disciples kept pestering him about his kingdom, when it would come? And what would they have to do. Jesus answered their questions by saying “The Father sets those dates and they are not for you to know.” If something we want doesn’t happen we have to wait patiently and if it is in Gods plan it will happen in his timing not ours. “When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will receive power and will tell everyone about me, everywhere.” continued Jesus.

Soon after Jesus had said this he ascended up to the sky disappearing before their eyes, the disciples watched in amazement. They needed to see this to believe he was Gods son and that he was now going home. While their eyes were turned towards the sky some angels appeared amongst them and said “Why are you staring into the sky, Jesus has gone home and will one day return.” We have to work hard to share the Good News and be prepared for his return.

They were at the mount of olives so they immediately returned to Jerusalem and gathered in an upstairs room for a prayer meeting, they knew they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit so they waited and prayed. They met regularly for prayer, by this time Jesus’ brothers were with the disciples. While Jesus’ ministry on earth his brothers didn’t believe him to be the messiah. His resurrection must have changed their minds.

The small group of eleven had now grown to one hundred and twenty believers and gathered together to pray for Gods guidance. Peter stood up and addressed them saying, “It was necessary for the scriptures to be fulfilled concerning Judas.” Judas had rejected Christ and had hardened his heart to join his enemies in their plot to kill Jesus. He didn’t repent and eventually killed himself. The disciples needed to find someone to replace Judas. Someone who had been with them all the time while they were with Jesus, from his baptism to his departure to heaven and who was there at his resurrection. When they came up with two suitable candidates they prayed that they would make a wise decision. The two were Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias. After a lot of prayer they decided that it should be Matthias, so he joined the other eleven in their mission to spread the Good News about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Chapter 2

Pentecost was also known as the festival of harvest held 50 days after the Passover. Jesus was crucified at Passover time and he ascended 40 days after his resurrection, 10 days later the Holy Spirit came. The believers were all gathered in one place when suddenly there was a sound from Heaven like a wild storm in the skies above and what looked like tongues of fire came and settled on each of them. This is exactly what John the Baptist meant when he said “I baptise with water but one is coming after me whose sandals I’m not worthy to tie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Everyone there was filled with the Holy Spirit and started speaking in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. God made his presence known to this group of believers in a dramatic way. There was a violent wind, storm, tongues of fire and the Holy Spirit. *Not everyone will have the same experience. Be careful not to force your expectations on God. He doesn't work in the same way twice.*

Jews came to Jerusalem from many different lands for the festival and when they heard what had happened, were amazed to hear their own language spoken by people who didn’t know it. They were telling of all the wonderful things God had done. Some were amazed but others thought they were drunk.

Peter stepped out and approached the crowd, “How can we be drunk, it is much too early for that, it is only 9 o’clock in the morning. Make no mistake what you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel. *Not everything Joel predicted came true that morning, but it will when Christ returns.*”

Peter stood up and said “God used his Son Jesus to do miracles and wonders as you might well know. Everything that happened to Jesus was part of Gods plan. He had to die to fulfil the scriptures. God raised him back to life because his lifeline was unable to be cut; death could not keep a hold of him.

Peter quotes from Psalm 16v8-11
“I know the Lord is always with me.
I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.
No wonder my heart is filled with joy
And my mouth shouts his praises.
My body rests in hope
For you will not leave my soul among the dead
Or allow your Holy one to rot in the grave
You have shown me the way of life
And you will give me wonderful joy in your presence.”

He explains here that David wasn’t speaking about himself in this passage for he had died and was buried. He spoke as a prophet for he knew God would fulfil his promise that the messiah would be one of his descendants. The prophecy was about Jesus who didn’t rot in the grave but was

resurrected and glorified.

After Peter's Spirit filled message the people were deeply moved and asked, "What must we do?" *That is the first question we must ask. It's not enough to be sorry for the sins we commit we must also repent and ask God for his forgiveness.*

Peter goes on to say "You must turn away from sin and turn to God. This means repent and change the direction in which your life is heading and at the same time turn to Christ. Being baptized is a confession of faith. We cannot save ourselves only God can do that."

All those who believed were baptized, there were about 3,000 in all. They joined the others and started attending their meetings, sharing the fellowship together and taking part in the Lords Supper. *New believers need to meet with other Christians to mature in their faith and learn more about God. The Lords Supper is what we call communion, we do this to remind us of what Christ Jesus has done for us.*

Recognizing the other believers as brothers and sisters in Gods family they shared generously all they had and helped those in need. The apostles were overwhelmed with a deep sense of awe and performed many miraculous signs and wonders. *We need to work together for Gods family to be at its best. The only problem for the early Christians was that they were Jews and they were forced to meet in private homes to pray and learn more about Jesus. The number of those who are being saved are increasing everyday and are added to the church.*

Chapter 3

Many Jews attended prayer meetings in the temple. There were three, one in the morning, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. On this particular day Peter and John went to the afternoon prayer meeting. As they arrived they saw a man lame from birth being carried. He was placed each day by the temple gate, the one called the “Beautiful Gate”. The reason why is that he would be seen by many people as they went into the temple for worship and thus, he could beg. When he saw Peter and John approaching he asked them for some money. Peter said “Look at us” and the lame man looked, half expecting a small gift, but Peter said “I’m sorry I don’t have any money to give you. The look of disappointment was on the lame mans face. Then Peter said “I can give you something even better. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth get up and walk.” Peter took the man by his hand and helped him to his feet. *Don’t be surprised when God gives you what you really need.*

The apostles were encouraged by the Holy Spirit to bring healing and wonders to the people. As the lame man got to his feet he was amazed when he found out his ankles were gaining strength and he started jumping and praising God. Then he went inside the temple with them.

The people inside had to look twice. They thought they were seeing things. They were saying things like

“Is it possible;

could it be;

no it can’t be!

it must be someone else” or

“Is that the man we see everyday sat outside” among themselves. When they recognized him as the once lame man they all stood in awe of the wonderful thing that had happened. People gathered around to see what had happened and Peter saw this opportunity to share with them the message about Christ Jesus.

Peter explained to the crowd who Jesus is and the fact that some people rejected him and even had him put to death. The people had a choice to have a murderer, or Jesus set free. They chose the murderer and shouted all the more “Crucify Jesus”. It was all in God’s plan from the beginning. You killed the author of life but death could not hold on to him and God brought him back to life.

The people thought they had put an end to Jesus when they crucified him but little did they know that it was what had to be done. When Peter told them that he was alive again their confidence was shaken. He told the people that it was through faith in Jesus Christ that this lame man was healed and not by his own power. Always give glory to Jesus and do not accept it for yourselves. God was fulfilling what the prophets had prophesied long ago concerning the Messiah. The Jews were expecting a great ruler not a suffering servant. Peter urges everyone to turn from their evil ways and repent, following the example of John the Baptist who came

to prepare the way for Jesus. *It may be hard to give up certain sins but when we turn from them God will show us a new and better way to live.*

When it is time for the final judgment The messiah will return to put an end to sin once and for all. We will stand by the judgment seat of God. The prophets long ago had predicted the final days and that the messiah must stay in heaven until those days. Many Jews believed that Joshua was the prophet that was predicted by Moses long ago but Peter explained that the prophet was Jesus Christ. Peter and the other apostles were trying to help the Jews realise what they had done to the messiah they had long waited for. They had rejected him so the Good News reached the Gentiles who received him openly.

Every prophet since Samuel has spoken about what is happening today. You are children of these prophets and are included in the promise covenant that God had with your ancestors. God said to Abraham “All families on earth will be blessed through your descendants, the Jews. From there the messiah came as Gods son. He raised this suffering servant and sent him first to the Jews who rejected him, then to the Gentiles to help them see the danger of their sinful ways.

Chapter 4

While Peter and John were speaking at an afternoon meeting some men gathered round them who didn't believe what they were saying about Jesus. Among them were some who were involved in the crucifixion of Jesus. The Sadducee's came forward to investigate for they did not believe in the resurrection and were disturbed by what the apostles were saying. They had the apostles arrested because they were contradicting the beliefs of the Sadducee's. Since it was already evening Peter and John were jailed till the morning. *It's not often that sharing the Good News will send you to jail as it did for Peter and John. We still need to run risks in winning others to Christ. Whatever you do for God is never wasted. Most of the people who heard the apostles message believed them and so the number of believers grew.*

The next day Peter and John were brought in front of the Jewish high council, the same one Jesus had to stand before. They didn't think Jesus had followers who were persistent and even more troublesome than he was. They wanted to know by what power and in whose name they had healed the man.

Peter, full of the Holy Spirit boldly spoke, asking the High council "Do you want to know how this crippled man was healed? Let me tell you he was healed in the name and power of Jesus Christ whom you lot crucified thinking you had put an end to him but God brought him back to life.

The scriptures referred to Jesus when they said "the stone that you builders rejected has now become the corner stone ". Without Jesus there would be no Church and it would all struggle. Many people find it hard to understand that there is no other that can bring Salvation. Other religious leaders can't save us. They all have sin in their genes. Jesus was conceived through the Holy Spirit. Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name given to men by which we are saved. Jesus is the only one who is without sin and therefore can save us from sins grip on us. There is no other who can do this.

The members of the council were amazed when they realised Peter and John were ordinary men who weren't very educated and had no special training. They wondered what kind of man that Jesus must have been to have this effect on Peter and John. Their lives were changing before their eyes. We are called to be different from the rest of the world. The man they knew to be healed was within the room where they were questioning Peter and John, so they asked him to leave the room while a discussion took place. They were deciding what to do with these men. They had come up with an idea of trying to stop them teaching in the name of Jesus Christ. They fetched the apostles in and commanded them never again are you to speak or teach in Jesus Christ's name.

In their reply they said, "We can't obey you and we can't stop telling people of what we have heard or seen with our own eyes." In the end the

council had to let Peter and John go for they didn't want to start a riot. Everyone was dancing and praising God because the crippled man had been healed. When they were freed Peter and John told the other believers what the leading priests and the elders had said. They couldn't believe what they heard. All the believers met together for a prayer meeting. They prayed "Lord, creator of heaven and earth, the ocean and all that is in them. Long ago you spoke through your servant and our ancestor King David saying:

Why did the nations rage?

Why did the people waste their time with futile plans?

The kings of the earth prepare for battle

The rulers gathered together

Against the Lord

Against the Messiah

That's exactly what's happening here today for these people here were responsible for putting Jesus Christ to death. The Sovereign Lord is in control of all events that happen and what they did was all part of Gods Plan. Lord hear what these people are saying and strengthen your servant to speak with boldness, let there be wonders and miracles done through the name of your Holy Servant Jesus."

Note how these people prayed. Their first reaction should have been to ask God to remove the problem, but instead they asked for strength to deal with the problem.

Boldness is having the courage to do what you know is right. We can pray that the power of the Holy Spirit will give us courage. Look for and use any opportunity among friends and family to share the gospel. Don't be put off by rejection or embarrassed to speak.

All the believers shared everything they had. They couldn't bare to watch people suffering and struggling while they had everything they needed. They didn't see what they had as their own, they realised everything they had belonged to God and they were sharing what was already God's. The rich sold their fields and houses so they could help those in need.

There was a man called Joseph who the apostles gave the nickname Barnabas meaning "Son of Encouragement". He was a member of the tribe of Levi. His family had moved to Cyprus. He sold a field, giving what money he got for it to the apostles to share among those in need.

Chapter 5

There was a man called Ananias who lived with his wife Sapphira. They were very wealthy and owned a lot of land and property. One day they decided to sell some property which was fine as it was theirs to sell. They gave some of the money to the apostles and claimed it was the full amount. Why did they lie about the amount of money? It was theirs to do with as they chose. They wanted to keep some of the money for themselves. Saying it was the full amount made them look more generous than they really were.

Peter couldn't believe what Ananias had done and asked in an angry tone, "Ananias why have you allowed Satan to fill your heart? You have lied not only to me and everyone here but by keeping some of the money, you have also lied to the Holy Spirit. The property you sold was yours to do with what you wanted and the money was yours to give or keep. How could you do this? You were lying to God."

When Ananias had heard these words he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who saw this was terrified. Then some men wrapped him in clothes and carried him outside to be buried.

Sapphira, the wife of Ananias hadn't heard what had happened to her husband so when Peter called her in she too lied.

Peter said "How could you two even think of doing this, working together to test the Spirit of the Lord. Do you know that men are outside burying your husband and soon they will be burying you as well." She instantly fell to the floor and died. When the men had finished burying her husband they came in and saw she was dead too and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. There was a great sense of fear that took a strong hold of all believers who had heard what had happened.

However the apostles continued to be led by the Holy Spirit performing many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. The believers met regularly in the porch area of the temple. People carried the lame, sick and those who were possessed by demons out into the street so that Peter's shadow might fall across some of them as he walked past. It was the Holy Spirit working through Peter not his shadow that healed these people. It was the expression of Gods power at work that attracted people to the early church.

The religious leaders got very jealous because Peter and the other apostles were commanding more respect than they ever had and they didn't like that. The religious leaders demanded respect and reverence for themselves but the apostles were more interested in bringing respect and reverence for God.

The apostles were encouraged through the Holy Spirit to do miracles and to preach with boldness the good news of Jesus Christ and to show Gods work in their lives. They were beaten, flogged and thrown into prison by

the local community of religious leaders. Faith doesn't remove the troubles we face but makes them easier to cope with and puts them in the right place. *Don't be put off if people react negatively when you share something as dynamic as your faith. Your concern should be to serve God and not what other people think of you.*

The Lord sent an angel to free the apostles and told them to go into the temple and give this message of life. The apostles went into the temple when it was at its busiest to speak the Good News. These religious leaders would do anything to stop the apostles challenging their authority. The apostles faced the high council who wanted them dead and yet they kept preaching. They weren't afraid to die. The high council met to question the apostles and ordered the apostles to be brought to them. When they went to the jail they found it empty, the door was locked and the guard was outside keeping watch. They reported what they had found to the high council. When the men who formed the high council heard what had happened they couldn't understand and wondered when all these miraculous signs and wonders would end. Word got back to the high council that the men they had jailed so recently were back in the temple teaching the people!!

When the religious leaders who made up the high council heard this they went to the temple and arrested them quietly as they feared the reaction of the people. The apostles stood in front of the High council again and they demanded "Didn't we tell you never again to preach in this man's name and you have filled the temple with your teachings about Jesus and you blame us for his death." Peter and the other apostles replied "We have to obey God not human authority." *There may be situations where you can't please both God and people. Like the apostles, you should obey God and trust his word.* "The God of our ancestors brought Jesus back to life after you put him to death. Then God put him in the place of honour as the saviour of the world. He did this to give people an opportunity to turn from the sins of the world to God and be forgiven. We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, who is given by God to those who obey him." Acts 5:32

When the High Council heard their reply they got so angry they couldn't take any more accusations so they decided it would be better to kill them. One member, a Pharisee called Gamaliel didn't seem to think killing them was the answer and he ordered the apostles to be sent outside the council chamber for a while. He then addressed the members. "Take care what you are planning to do to these men. Long ago there was a man called Theudas who pretended to be someone great. He had lots of followers but when he died, all his followers went their own way. Then some time later another man had some followers. He was killed and his followers were scattered. Gamaliel's advice gave the apostles longer to preach. He didn't approve or support their teaching yet he saved their lives. The council thought if they left them alone they would eventually get tired and give up their preaching. They could not have been more wrong!

Gamaliel gave the advice to leave the apostles alone saying "If these men

are teaching these things with their own power and strength it will all start to crumble and be no more, but if it is through God then no one will be able to stop them. You may find that you are fighting against God.

The council decided to let them go on the condition that they never again speak in the name of Jesus Christ. The apostles were warned repeatedly never to preach or teach in the name of Jesus Christ, but they paid no attention to them and continued in spite of the threats and being ridiculed for their faith. They were persecuted and yet they rejoiced in the fact that God had allowed them to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. Each day they continued to teach the early Christians in homes and in the temple saying “The messiah for whom you are looking is Jesus.”

Chapter 6

As the believers grew in number the early church developed yet another problem. The Greek Speaking Christians complained against those who spoke Hebrew. They were saying that their widows were being unfairly treated when it came to the distribution of their daily food. The original eleven disciples plus Matthias whom they chose to replace Judas Iscariot called a meeting of all the believers.

The apostles were trying to do too much and they soon realized they should concentrate on preaching and teaching the word of God. The believers chose a number of people full of the Holy Spirit to organize a food programme to ensure the apostles had time to do what they had been called to do, preaching the word of God. There were seven whom the believers had chosen and they were brought to the apostles who laid their hands on them and prayed. *Leadership is a very serious matter and should not be taken lightly. These men had to be set apart to do what God wanted.*

The good news was spreading like a wild fire across the world and the number of believers increase rapidly. There were some Jewish priests being converted. *Don't ever think your part in spreading the gospel is unimportant.*

Stephen was one of the seven whom the believers chose to distribute the food so that everyone had a sufficient amount. He was a man full of the grace and power of God. The Holy Spirit within him enabled him to perform most extraordinary miracles among the people. One day some men who were slaves. They were freed by Rome and had formed a small Jewish synagogue in Jerusalem. They started a debate with him but there was not one who was able to stand against the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke. They even managed to persuade some men to lie about Stephen. *They had to lie about Stephen because they couldn't find anything wrong with him and they wanted him out of the way.* Saying they had heard him blaspheme Moses and even God.

The Sadducee's who made up most of the council only accepted the law of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. To them, to speak blasphemy against Moses was a criminal offence. The crowds, the elders and the teachers of religious law were naturally angered by this statement. They threw Stephen in prison to be questioned by the High Council.

They had Stephen brought to the high council where they found a witness who was willing to lie. The witness said, "I have heard this man, he is always speaking against the temple and against what Moses wrote." Another lying witness spoke up saying he also had heard him say this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the temple and change the way Moses taught us. At this everybody had their eyes on Stephen as his face became as bright as an angels.

Chapter 7

The high priest who questioned Stephen about these accusations was probably the same man who had questioned Jesus when he was on trial.

Stephen reminded the people of their history right back to Abraham whom God had appeared to him telling him to leave his land and go to the land which God would show him. Abraham took all his family and left Chaldeans and moved to Haran. He stayed there till his father died. Then God brought him here where you now live.

Stephen started a long speech about Israel's history quoting from the Old Testament and he made three main points. First thing he noted was that Israel's history is the history of what God has done, his acts in the world. The second point he wanted to get across was that people were worshipping God long before the temple was built. God doesn't live in a temple but in all believers. Thirdly he wanted the people to understand that Jesus' death was an example of Israel's rebellion against and the rejection of God.

Stephen continues, "God didn't give Abraham any ground here; but God did promise him one day all his descendants would live here and would be badly treated. They were to be slaves for four hundred years. And God told him "I will not let the nation that has made my people slaves go unpunished. They will worship God in the end."

Circumcision was an outward sign of the covenant that God gave Abraham. Abraham had to circumcise his son Isaac when he was eight days old. Isaac was the father of Jacob and Jacob was the father of the 12 who became the Jewish nation.

Stephen, while summarizing Israel's history pointed out that God always kept his side of the promise but Israel kept failing to keep it's side. Even though they had had the outward sign when they were babies their hearts were distant from God. They lacked faith and they failed again and again to keep their side of the covenant.

He, Stephen tells the story about Joseph and how his brothers were jealous because their father seemed to show favouritism to him. One day, while out in the fields they had sold their brother Joseph to some passer by and he had become their slave. *God was with him. What ever happened to him, God was always in control.* The king of Egypt made Joseph in charge of all the affairs of the palace and gave him the job of being governor of all Egypt.

One day there was a food shortage in the land of Egypt and Canaan. The people were getting hungry as the food they had was running out. Jacob had heard that there was some grain left in Egypt so he sent his sons to try and buy some. The second time Jacobs sons went their brother Joseph revealed to them his true identity. He then asked for his father and all who

lived with him to come and join him in Egypt and that is where Jacob and all his sons died and were buried.

Time was getting near when God would fulfil his promise to Abraham and the number of our people increased in Egypt. There was a new king who came to the throne and he knew nothing about Joseph. This king was bad, he ordered the parents to leave their new born babies so they would die. Moses was born at this time, his mother knew he had to live and cared for him till they couldn't hide him any longer. When the time came his mother laid him among the reeves and Pharaohs daughter found him and looked after him as if he were her very own son. Moses was taught a lot of wisdom that Egyptians needed.

One day when Moses was getting on in years he went to visit his relatives, the Israelites. While he was visiting he saw an Egyptian being unkind and treating one of the Israelite's like dirt so he came over and killed the Egyptian. Moses thought his brothers, the Israelite's would see that God sent him to rescue them but they didn't.

When Moses went back the next day he saw fighting among his brothers and tried to break it off but they told him to mind his own business and asked if he were going to kill them like the Egyptian the other day. When Moses heard this he was saddened and left the country. He lived as an alien in Midian, and had two sons born there.

At the age of 80 Moses was standing in the desert quite near Mount Sinai. There he noticed something rather peculiar and went over to investigate. It was a burning bush but there was no change in its appearance and an angel of the Lord appeared to him. The voice of the Lord called to him from the burning bush saying "I am the God of your ancestors the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". Moses had a look of fear and terror on his face and couldn't bare to look. The Lord spoke to Moses through the burning bush telling him to take his sandals off for the place where he was standing was holy ground. He also said "I know the misery of my people and have heard their cries and I want you to go back and rescue them. *God sent the same man the Israelite's had previously rejected to deliver them out of Egypt.* Through many miracles and wonders with God in control he led them across the Red Sea and finally to the wilderness for forty years.

Moses, a prophet spoke about the coming Messiah by saying "God will raise up a prophet like me from among your own people. The Jews thought Moses was speaking about Joshua, but they were wrong. Moses was among the congregation of Gods people in the wilderness. God used Moses to teach the Israelite's how to live as Gods chosen people and God gave Moses the ten commandments on mount Sinai to pass on to us.

Our brothers who were in the wilderness didn't believe everything would be ok and wanted to return to Egypt where they knew they would live in comfort. While Moses was up Mount Sinai the people got fed up of waiting so they told Aaron that they wanted some Gods to lead them because Moses was taking too long in coming down. They gave Aaron all

their gold and he melted it all down to form an idol in the shape of a calf. They offered sacrifices and worshiped this idol they had made. God didn't like this so he turned away from them giving them over to the sun, moon and stars to be their Gods.

The prophets said long ago "Was it to me you sacrificed these things while you were in the wilderness for all those years. No, you were more interested in the Gods you created and you worshiped them. I will send you into captivity far away from Babylon."

While our brothers were wandering through the wilderness they had the task of carrying the tabernacle with them. It was built up with the instructions given to Moses from God.

A few years later there was a leader called Joshua who led the fighting against the gentile people. God drove these people out of this land and they took the tabernacle with them into the new place. It was being used in that land right up to the time when King David took the throne. David was a good King and wanted to do what pleased God. He asked permission to build a temple for the God of Jacob. It was his son Solomon who built it in the end. *The most high is not limited to a building built with human hands, for his home is in heaven and earth is his footstool. He lives in the hearts of all those who will receive him. Stephen was wrongly accused of speaking. He knew how important the temple was but he also knew God was more important. He had got his priorities right.*

You stubborn people, wont you open your ears to the truth. Why are you always resisting the Holy Spirit. Your brothers did and now you are doing the same thing. Can you name a prophet who was on the receiving end of your ancestors persecution? You can't can you because they even put an end to those who predicted the coming of the righteous one whom you also betrayed and left to die. You knowingly disobeyed Gods law even though it was given to you from angels"

After Stephen's speech the Jewish leaders became furious by what he said, and the accusations he made. They became so angry they showed their fists at him. Stephen who was full of the Holy Spirit turned his eyes towards the heavens. The glory of God came into his view. His eyes came into contact with Jesus, Gods son. He was standing at Gods right hand, the place of honor. And he told them what he saw. Stephens words were very similar to those spoken by Jesus when he was in the presence of the High Council.

What Stephen saw with his eyes supported what Jesus said would happen, but it also made the Jewish leaders angry. They were the ones who put Jesus to death for blasphemy.

The Jewish leaders covered their ears to shut out Stephens voice and raised their own shouts. They didn't like what they heard so they dragged him out into the streets and began throwing stones at him. As the stones came his way he prayed "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." Then he collapsed on

his knees shouting “Lord, don’t charge them with this sin.” And with that he breathed his last breath.

Among the crowd who were throwing stones at Stephen was a young man by the name of Saul who later in life became the greatest apostle who had ever lived, changing his name to Paul. Stephens death had an amazing effect on so many people and years later they came to Christ. You may be rejected and even silenced now when you talk openly about your faith, but never give up people may come to Christ later.

When we meet Paul we will find out that he was a persecutor of the Christian faith. Paul was a prime example of someone who it was thought, couldn’t be reached and even changed by God himself.

Chapter 8

Persecution began to spread like wild fire over Jerusalem forcing the believers to flee to Judea and Samaria. The apostles stayed behind. Some religious men came and with loud weeping they buried Stephen.

Persecution helped the spread of the Good news! Saul was doing everything in his power to bring devastation to the church. He was on the look out for believers, men and women, dragging them out of their homes and throwing them in to jail. *We may have to suffer discomfort so God can use us in his plan.*

The believers that left Jerusalem started spreading the Good News about Jesus everywhere they went. Philip, one of the seven who was chosen to help with the food distribution in the church was full of the Holy Spirit and went to Samaria telling the people there about the Messiah. Crowds gathered round him and took an interest in what he was saying and watched the miracles he performed. There were evil spirits being cast out. The paralysed and the lame were being healed. *Jesus met quite a lot of evil spirits while he walked the earth. Evil spirits work together with Satan in his attempt to destroy Gods creation. They can only do what God allows them to do because God is in complete control.*

There was a man called Simon who had worked for many years as a sorcerer and had claimed to be someone of great importance. The people of Samaria spoke of him as “the Great one – the power of God.” He performed many wonders through the aids of an evil spirit. Some even thought, because of all he did, he was the Messiah. His power did not come from God but from evil spirits. The people of Samaria heard and believed Philips message of good new concerning the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ, which resulted in men and women being baptized. At the time of the early church there were many sorcerers and magicians delving into the dark world and performing wonders through the help of Satan. Simon the sorcerer, as a result of Philips message, also believed and came forward to be baptized. He then began to hang around Philip, going everywhere he went. He was amazed at the amount of miracles Philip performed.

When the believers left in Jerusalem got word back from Samaria that they had accepted Philips message containing the Good News about Jesus Christ, they sent Peter and John there. Peter and John were sent to Samaria to find out if the people were becoming true believers. The people of Samaria didn’t realise the Holy Spirit was for all. They became convinced after the experience Peter had with Cornelius that that was the case. When they arrived in Samaria they immediately began to pray that the believers would receive the Holy Spirit. They were only baptised into the name of Jesus Christ and didn’t have the Holy Spirit within them.

The pouring out of the Holy Spirit on this occasion was a special event. God wanted to teach the believers that the Holy Spirit can be received by

gentiles and not just pure Jews.

Peter and John went round all the believers, placing their hands on them and as they did this the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Simon, one of the new believers was amazed when he saw that the Holy Spirit came upon them by the laying on of the apostles hands. He thought he could buy this power and offered money saying “Let me have this power too, so that the Holy Spirit will fall upon those I lay my hands on.” *Everything in this world seems to have a price. The only way to receive Gods power is to turn from sin and ask for forgiveness from God, also be filled with his Spirit. Money cant buy salvation but repentance and belief in Christ as saviour can.*

This is what Peter said to Simon when he wanted to buy the power they had. “May your money perish with you for thinking Gods gift can be bought. Your heart is not right with God. You need to turn from all this wickedness and pray, asking for forgiveness for all your evil thoughts. I can see you are full of bitterness and held captive to sin.”

Simon was a new believer and needed to be told what he was asking was wrong and realised it was for his own good.

He said to Peter “Will you pray to the Lord for me so that these horrible things wont happen to me.” After Peter and John had some time in Samaria they left and journeyed back to Jerusalem, stopping in many Samaritan villages on the way to teach them the Good News too.

Meanwhile, Philip who was having a very successful time in Samaria teaching them the Good News obediently left to walk along a deserted road heading south from Jerusalem to Gaza. He walked for a while wondering why God had told him it was time to move on then the answer came to him. A horse and carriage came by carrying a treasurer from Ethiopia, a eunuch travelling home from Jerusalem. He must have been very dedicated to God to travel such a long way to worship. The eunuch was now travelling home, he was reading from the book of Isaiah to pass the time by.

The Holy Spirit told Philip to go over and walk along side the carriage. By this time the carriage was quite a bit in front so Philip had to run to catch up with it. He over heard the man reading to himself and asked “Do you understand what you are reading?”

The man turns to Philip and says “How can I? There is no one to help me.” he then asked Philip to join him on the carriage, so he could help him. Philip climbed up and started to explain to him the passage he was reading and this is what it said.

“He was led as a sheep to the slaughter
And as a lamb is silent before the shearers
He did not open his mouth

He was humiliated and received no justice
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”

Philip, on finding the eunuch reading this scripture took the opportunity to explain the Good News. He was led by the spirit and he began a long discussion from where the man was.

The eunuch was interested to know who Isaiah was talking about, himself or someone else so he asked many questions. Philip explained that Jesus Christ fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah. He used many more scriptures to bring him the Good News.

As they were travelling along the road they went past some water and the eunuch saw it and asked “ Why can’t I be baptized?” He ordered the driver to pull over for a while and stop. They climbed down and went over to the water where Philip baptized him. After Philip had baptized the eunuch the Holy Spirit took Philip away and the eunuch never saw him again. Philip reappeared further north in the city of Azotus where he bought the Good News and he went to every city teaching them along the way, ending up in Caesarea.

Jesus' final words to his followers was to go to all nations and make disciples, but it took persecution to make them leave Jerusalem. Philip was a deacon who had the job of distributing food. He took the Good News to Samaria a very unlikely place. The Samaritans were becoming believers and Peter and John were sent to encourage them along the way. While being very successful in Samaria Philip left for an appointment with an Ethiopia eunuch to share with him the gospel.

Chapter 9

Meanwhile back in Jerusalem, this man named Saul was keen to do away with the Christians. He went to the high priest and asked for letters to be addressed to the Jewish place of worship in Damascus to ask them if they would arrest any who were following the Lord's way. He wanted to put a stop in Christianity spreading and he wanted to bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

While Saul was on the road to Damascus to carry out the persecution a bright light suddenly shone upon him from the heavens. He was amazed and fell on his knees and he heard a voice saying "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

He asked who it was that was speaking to him. The voice told him "It is I, Jesus the one you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do."

Saul was travelling with a small group of friends. They had heard the voice and saw no one, they were amazed and stood with their mouths open. The bright light had made Saul blind and when he got up his friends took him by the hand and led him to Damascus. He was blind for three days during which he had no food or water.

There was a believer in Damascus who went by the name of Ananias. He was interrupted with a vision where he heard the Lord speaking to him. The Lord was calling him by his name. "Ananias."

"Yes Lord" Ananias answered.

The Lord told him to go along straight street till he got to the house of Judas. On arrival you are to ask for Saul of Tarsus who is at this moment praying to me. He has been given a vision of a man named Ananias coming to him and placing his hands on him so he can see again.

"But Lord," exclaimed Ananias "You can't mean Saul of Tarsus, you must have made a mistake. How can he become a Christian? Wasn't it him who went about arresting your fellow believers and throwing them into prison."

The Lord told him to go and do exactly what he had told him to do. The Lord also said "I have chosen Saul to bring my message to the Gentiles and everyone, everywhere. I will show him how much he must suffer for me."

Ananias though reluctant to go chose to be obedient and trust God's leading. He went along to the house of Judas and found Saul in an upstairs room praying. He walked over to him and laid his hands on him. He said, "Brother Saul, The Lord Jesus whom you saw when you were on your way here has sent me to give you your sight back and so you will be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Ananias prayed with him and a strange thing happened, what looked like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He was then baptized in the river. He ate something to keep his strength up.

It isn't always easy to show love especially when you are unsure of what might happen.

Ananias as you might well have guessed trembled at the thought of meeting Saul because of what he had heard and the devastation in Jerusalem.

Saul was a new believer and he needed other believers around to encourage him and tell him when he did something wrong. He stayed with the believers in Damascus a few days to learn more about Jesus. Saul was bursting with excitement over his newly found faith and wanted to tell everyone he met what had happened. *Are you like Saul or do you keep it to yourself. We may need to be prepared to go into full time ministry but we don't need to wait to share our experience to others.* Saul went into the synagogues telling the Jews that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

All who heard him couldn't believe the change in this man's life. One minute he was persecuting Jesus' followers and the next he was encouraging them. They were talking amongst themselves, asking each other "Was it this man who started all this persecution towards the Christians in Jerusalem?" "Didn't he get permission to have people arrested and put chains on them and have them dragged back to Jerusalem."

Saul's preaching was becoming strong and the Jews in Damascus couldn't find any reason not to believe him. What was convincing was his changed life. People saw a difference in the way he lived. They believed that Jesus was indeed the messiah.

The Jewish leaders had had enough, Saul was taking over their place of worship and they wanted him dead. Saul was told what they were planning and that they were waiting for him at the city gate.

There were some houses that made up part of the city wall. Some of the believers there helped Saul escape by lowering him down the city wall through a window, in a large basket.

Saul had a bad reputation and the believers in Jerusalem were afraid of him. It must have been hard for Saul to change his reputation and to get the believers of Jerusalem on his side.

There was a man called Barnabas who took Saul to the apostles, telling them what had happened to him on his way to Damascus, his encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. He also told them what the Lord had told him to do and how he went into all the synagogues boldly preaching in the name of Jesus. The apostles knew then that he wasn't pretending and accepted him as a brother and he went everywhere with them preaching boldly that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. He found himself having a

debate with some Greek speaking Jews, but they were planning to have him killed. But when the believers heard about their plot to kill him they decided to lead him by the hand to a place called Caesarea and sent him back to his home town of Tarsus. After Saul was converted, the church seemed to enjoy a brief time of peace. His visit to Tarsus allowed him time to prove his commitments and the church grew so enthusiastically in strength and numbers. The believers were comforted by the Holy Spirit and were walking in the fear of the Lord.

Peter, while on his travels met with believers in every place he visited. On his travels he came to a place called Lydda. He walked amongst the believers and met a man who went by the name of Aeneas. Now this man had been paralysed and unable to get out of bed for eight years. Peters eyes showed love and concern when he saw this man lying in bed and said to him "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you! Get up and make your bed." He felt his blood rushing through his body, the circulation was back and he suddenly became strong and started walking. He was healed. All who saw what had happened turned to the Lord.

There was a believer not far from Lydda in a place called Joppa, her name was Tabitha. During her years she made an enormous impact on the community around her. She was always doing kind things to others, making coats and other garments. Her work for the poor was amazing. She became very ill and died suddenly, her friends got her ready for burial and carried her upstairs and laid her on a bed. Word got back to them that Peter wasn't far away in Lydda, so they sent two men to go and find him. They begged him to come quickly.

Peter returned with them and on his arrival they took him to where Tabitha lay. The room was crowded with mourners holding out the coats and other garments she had made for them. Peter asked them all politely to leave the room and he knelt down beside her and prayed. After a quiet moment deep in prayer he told Tabitha to get up. Tabitha opened her eyes as if she was just waking up from a deep sleep, she looked at Peter and he helped her sit up. He then came out and told everyone that they can go back in. They were all amazed, on entering they saw Tabitha sitting on the bed and they all embraced her with hugs and kisses. The news of what happened travelled around and many came to know the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa a long time with Simon, who was a leather worker.

Chapter 10

Along the Mediterranean coast in a city called Caesarea which was just 32 miles north of Joppa lived a Roman army officer named Cornelius, the captain of the Italian Regiment. Now this man had no knowledge of Jesus yet he was very fearful of the God of Israel. Everyone in his household, slaves and family feared God too. He was a very generous man and gave a lot to charity. He also prayed regularly not knowing whether his prayers would be heard.

Cornelius wasn't a believer in Christ but he was looking for God. One afternoon while he was busy doing his household duties he stood there mouth open as he saw a vision of a spiritual being coming towards him. God had sent an angel to meet his needs.

"Cornelius" the angel spoke to him.

Cornelius was frightened, his teeth were chattering and he struggled to get his words out "W-W-What I-I-is it s-s-sir?" he managed to ask. The angel continued by encouraging Cornelius who thought his prayers meant nothing by saying "God has made a note of your prayers and have seen what you have done for the poor. Send some men along the road to the place of Joppa. There you will find a man named Simon Peter. He is with Simon a leather worker, his home is along the shore and ask him to come and see you."

When the angel had left Cornelius asked to see some of his servants and some other trust worthy men. He told them what had happened and sent them of to find Simon Peter in the place of Joppa.

The next day the messengers were on their way round just outside the city. Peter wanted time on his own so he went up to the roof to pray. The time of day must have been about noon because his stomach was making noises, he was hungry. While the woman of the house was preparing lunch in the kitchen he fell into a trance. He saw the sky open and what looked like a large sheet being lowered to the ground. The sheet was full of all the different animals, reptile and many kinds of birds. Then he heard a voice say to him, "Get up Peter and kill them so you can eat."

According to the Jews there were certain foods which couldn't be eaten. This made it hard for Jews to socialise with Gentiles. Gentiles were in fact regarded as unclean. After seeing the vision Peter knew he had to go and proclaim salvation through Jesus Christ to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

Peter tried arguing with the voice, he shouted "Never my Lord, I could never eat anything that is forbidden by the Jewish laws. He heard the voice again, "If God says something is acceptable don't say it isn't."

The vision was repeated three times and after that the sheet was pulled back up to heaven.

God showed Peter that vision just in time, he wondered what ever could it mean. Then there was a knock on the door of the house where he was staying. These men were sent to find Peter, they were messengers from Cornelius household. They asked if Simon Peter was staying there.

Meanwhile Peter was trying to get his head around what the vision meant. He hadn't a clue. Then the Holy Spirit called out to him. "There are some men looking for you down stairs. I want you to go with them, please do not hesitate for I have sent them."

Peter went down and introduced himself to the men saying "I am he you are searching for. Why do you come?"

"Cornelius a Roman officer asked us to send for you. He is a good man who fears the God of Israel. He told us he had a visit from an angel who instructed him to send some men to find you so you can make his faith complete." It was late when they found him so Peter offered them a bed for the night, and they set off early the next morning. Some other believers went with them. When they arrived in Caesarea they had an overwhelming welcome, Cornelius had gathered together all his relations and some close friends so they could meet Peter and hear the message he had to bring. When Peter entered his home Cornelius fell to the floor in the act of worship. *This could have caused Peter to become proud but instead he pointed Cornelius to Christ.* Peter pulls him up and says "Stand up, am I not merely human like yourself." They talked together and went inside where everyone had gathered.

Peter told them "It is against my religion being a Jew to enter a home of a Gentile, but God has shown me that the message of salvation is for everyone and not to think Gentiles are impure. I came as soon as I could, now why did you send for me?"

Cornelius explained what had happened to him. "About four days ago I was in my house, it must have been about 3.00 that afternoon. I was praying. Suddenly from what seemed like nowhere a man appeared dressed in dazzling white. He told me my prayers have been heard and that what I have done for the poor have been seen by God. Now send some men to Joppa and find a man who goes by the name of Simon Peter. He is staying with Simon a leather worker down by the coast. It was good of you to come. We are all waiting to learn the message you have brought us from God.

Peter stood up and addressed those gathered around him, "I can now see that God doesn't show partiality. He accepts those who fear him whatever their background is and those that do what is right."

In the first century the believers were mostly Jews and it was not acceptable for Jews to socialize with Gentiles. God told Peter to take the Good News to a Roman Officer, he obeyed. We should not let any barrier stop us from reaching those who want to hear the Good News about our Lord Jesus Christ.

“I understand that you have heard that the Good News is for the people of Israel and that there is peace with God through Christ Jesus who is Lord of all. You must have heard what happened in all Judea, beginning in Galilee once John the Baptist started preaching. God gave Jesus his Holy Spirit and the power to do his will. Then Jesus went everywhere doing good and healing those who were possessed by demons. For he had God with him. We apostles saw everything he did throughout Israel and in Jerusalem. They had Jesus put to death, shouting out crucify him and God raised him back to life three days later. Then Jesus appeared to us apostles who has been chosen to be his witnesses, we had the privilege of eating and drinking with him after he had risen from the dead. He gave orders that we were to go everywhere preaching and testifying that Jesus is ordained of God to be the judge of the living and the dead. He is the one whom the prophets testified about. They say all those who believe in him shall have their sins forgiven through his name.”

All who were there heard the message and received the Holy Spirit while Peter was still speaking. The other believers from Joppa couldn't believe their eyes for they thought Gentiles couldn't receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit fell on them and they began speaking in tongues and praising God. Peter asked his companions whether they would object to them being Baptised now that they had received the Holy Spirit. He led them down to the river and baptised them in the name of Jesus Christ. Cornelius offered his hospitality and asked Peter if he would like to stay for a few days.

Chapter 11

News of what happened to these Gentiles reached the apostles and other believers in Judea. When Peter was first seen back in Jerusalem he was criticized by the Jewish believers. They thought it wasn't fashionable to socialise with Gentiles. Peter felt the need to explain why he reached out to the Gentiles and he told them about the vision the Lord had given him. That this salvation is for everyone not just the Jews. The Jews, after they had heard Peter explanation they were filled with wonder for Gods plan of eternal life was for all.

During the time when the believers in Jerusalem they were forced to leave because of the persecution that was against them, they scattered across the land even as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch of Syria. Everywhere they went they started to preach the Good News but only where the Jews had gathered. However there were some believers in Antioch who took the message to the Gentiles.

There was a great sense of the Lords power as it came upon them and plenty of the Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

As soon as the Jerusalem church got word of what happened in Antioch they thought they would send someone to check it out. They sent Barnabas, on his arrival he witnessed the proof of Gods favour, his face was brightened with joy. He encouraged the believers he found to stay true to the Lord. *Barnabas was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and strong in his faith. Are you like Barnabas who helps new believers grow in faith. Think of ways you can help them.* A large number of people came to the Lord. After a while Barnabas went to find Saul in Tarsus and he brought him back to the city of Antioch to help the church there. They stayed a while and teached the believers.

There was a group of prophets from Jerusalem travelling to Antioch. When they arrived, one of them named Agabus took over one of the meetings led by the spirit to tell the people of a great famine that would happen. This came true during the time of Claudius.

The Believers in Antioch felt the urge to help their brothers and sisters in Judea and they all gave generously what they could, giving their gifts to Barnabas and Saul, trusting them to pass it on to the elders in Jerusalem.

Chapter 12

King Herod Agrippa, son of Aristobulus was part Jewish. His sister took part in executing John the Baptist. He was trying to impress the Jews and began persecuting the believers.

James and John were part of the 12 disciples who hung around Jesus. Jesus told them to be part of the kingdom they would need to suffer, James was killed by the sword and later John was exiled.

When Herod Agrippa saw how pleased the Jews were he decided to have Peter arrested at the Pass over celebration. He was placed in prison with the intention of bringing him out for trial once the Passover had finished. Meanwhile the rest of the believers prayed for Peters safety. *Prayer can change the outcome.* While the believers were praying for Peter an amazing thing happened, just before Peter was going to be on trial. The night before he was sound asleep with chains attached to two soldiers, the others were at the prison gate. When suddenly a great light filled the cell, an angel stood in the midst. Peter was so oblivious to all that was going on around him, he was far away in dream land. The angel had to nudge him, he slowly opened his sleepy eyes and wondered what's going on. The angel told him, "Quickly get up," the chains fell to the floor and the angel told him to get dress and follow him. Peter did what the angel told him, still not sure whether it was really happening. He left the prison cell, walked past the guards who gave a loud snore as they went past them. They came to the big iron gate which opened all on its own and they were out in the street. They were walking along the cobbled street when the angel suddenly was gone, vanished into thin air. It suddenly clicked to Peter what had just happened and he was amazed, speaking to himself. He still couldn't believe that one minute he was in prison and the next walking along the street. He says to himself, "The Lord has rescued me from Herod and what the other Jews were hoping to do to me."

After he had time to soak all that had just happened he made his way to the home where there was a prayer meeting in process. He knocked ferociously at the door shouting "Is there anyone there." Now there was a young servant girl called Rhoda who went to answer the door. As soon as she got to the door she heard the voice from the other side and was overjoyed, she forgot about opening the door and went rushing back to the others, she was so excited she struggled to get her words out. She says, "Peter's here, he's standing at the door."

"It can't be, he's in jail," one of the men said and carried on praying. She kept insisting it was Peter and then finally accepted it as being his angel. They finally went to the door, they were not expecting to see Peter and were amazed just stood there with their mouths open. *They had just been praying for his safety and when the answer came they didn't believe it.* They were all so pleased to see him that they gave him a big welcome.

Peter was overwhelmed by the welcome and asked for silence so he could tell them about the amazing escape. He told them that the Lord had sent an angel to lead him out of jail. Then Peter asked them to tell the other brothers about what had happened. Then he journeyed to another place.

Meanwhile back at the jail the soldiers were full of confusion. They wondered what had happened to Peter. When Herod Agrippa found out he ordered the soldiers to look everywhere for him. When they couldn't find him Herod took the guards aside and questioned them, then he had them put to death. Herod moved away from Judea and found his way to Caesarea, where he stayed for a while.

The people of Tyre and Sidon made Herod very angry for some unknown reason. They sent a small group of people to try and calm him down. Their cities had become dependent upon Herod's country for what food they needed. They introduced themselves to Blastus who was Herod's personal assistance and became a good friend. He made them an appointment to meet with Herod. On that day he made a special effort and decided he would put his royal robes on, he sat on his golden throne and gave a long and winded speech. At the end there was an amazing uproar as the crowds put their hands together and shouted, "This is no man, it's a God. Herod accepted this praise instead of giving it to God.

God chose to punish this sin straight away, he sent an angel to place an excruciating painful sickness upon Herod. He had worms and they ate him alive starting with the organs inside and working their way out. He died. *The Good News was spreading like fire that has lost control and there were a great many of new believers.*

On completion of their mission in Jerusalem Barnabas and Saul travelled back to Antioch. They decided to bring John Mark with them.

Chapter 13

In the church at Antioch of Syria the prophets and teachers were made up of people who have a variety of different backgrounds. There was Barnabas an encourager, Simon who was also called “The black man,” Lucius who came all the way from Cyrene, Manaen who used to play with King Herod Antipus when they were children and Saul who persecuted the Christians.

All these five that have been mentioned all have one thing in common, their faith in Christ. We should not leave out anyone who has been called to follow Christ, it doesn't matter about what they did before.

These men met together now and again to fast and worship the Lord, on one of these occasions there was a mighty blow as the Holy Spirit made its presence known “Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for I have special work for them to do.” They fasted and prayed some more then they laid their hands upon their heads and sent them on the journey that awaited them.

This is the start of Paul’s missionary work. They were sent by the church but it was all part of God’s plan for them. Saul and Barnabas, led by the Holy Spirit went down to the coast at Seleucia and got into a boat which took them across the ocean to the Island of Cyprus. The Island of Cyprus had a large Jewish population and was once home for Barnabas. When they arrived they found a small town called Salamis and they entered the Jewish synagogues there and started teaching them the word of God. They took John Mark with them.

When they had been all over the Island going from town to town preaching the Good News they finished up at Paphos. Where they came in contact with a Jewish sorcerer who was also a false prophet, he had the name “Bar Jesus”. He was joined at the hip to the governor of the Island, Sergius Paulus. He followed him everywhere and when the Islands governor asked Barnabas and Saul to come and join him for afternoon tea and chat Bar Jesus started to worry, he thought he would be out of a job. Sergius Paulus wanted an understanding of the Good News. The sorcerers name was Elymas in the Greek language and he begged Sergius Paulus not to listen to Barnabas and Saul for he didn’t want the governor to become a believer in the Christian faith.

Then Saul, who got his name changed to Paul after his conversion was led by the Holy Spirit to do what was right. He confronted Bar Jesus, bringing his sin to his attention. Paul says to him, “You belong to the Devil full of all kinds of tricks and an enemy to all that is good, will you never stop perverting the true ways of the Lord. The Lord has reached out to you his hand of punishment for this sin, you will be unable to use your eyes to see the beauty of the world.” Blindness came upon him suddenly and he fumbled around seeking some one to take his hand. The governor, after seeing what happened became a believer and was filled with astonishment

by what he found out about the Lord.

Paul and the rest of his mission team made their way to the shore and boarded a ship which took them to Pamphylia. They got off the ship at Perga. For some unknown reason their companion John Mark walked out and left them, returning to Jerusalem. *There are many reasons that have been suggested for this departure. He may have become ill which might have effected his work. He may not have agreed in the change of leadership from his cousin Barnabas to Paul. He may have only intended to go that far but forgot to let his companions know.* That didn't stop Paul and Barnabas and they walked bare foot to Antioch of Pisidia.

While they were there they entered the synagogue. They slipped into a pew at the back for the services. After all the regular readings and prayers had been spoken, those who had a say in who was to take the sermon went over to see Paul and Barnabas and invited them to speak any encouraging words.

Paul came forward raised his hand as to quieten the congregation down and his speech began by addressing the people there. Paul started at his audience level of understanding. He reminds them of their history before he brings to them the Good News about Jesus. "People of Israel and those God fearing Gentiles, I have something important to say so listen very carefully to what I have to say.

"The God of Israel chose our people and they have increased in number in the Land of Egypt. He then led them miraculously out of bondage from the Egyptians, and he put up with all their moaning and grumbling as they wondered around the wilderness for forty years. The seven nations in Canaan were completely destroyed and was given to the Israelites as an inheritance which took all of 450 years. The Land was ruled by judges until Samuel started his prophesying. The people became unsettled and begged for a king to rule the land. Saul became king and after forty years God replaced him with David. The man whom God had said, "is a man after my own heart, he will do everything I want him to." Among King David's descendants was Jesus whom God promised would be the saviour of the world. There was a man called John the Baptist who went everywhere preaching the need for everyone everywhere to stop sinning and turn their lives to God. He baptized them in the river Jordan. When John had finished he felt the need to ask them a question. "Do you think I am the Messiah the one you've been waiting for, I am not he. He is on his way and I am not even worthy to be his slave.

"Brothers, sons of Abraham and all those trusted worthy Gentiles who fear the God of Israel. There is salvation for us all. In Jerusalem there was an uproar and the people fulfilled what the prophets had said when they had Jesus put to death. They didn't understand that the prophets were talking about Jesus even though they heard them read out every week. They found no reason to put the man to death but they shouted crucify him all the same.

“When they had finally completed what the prophets had said concerning this man’s death they lifted him down from the cross and wrapped him in some white linen and laid him in a tomb. Death could not keep hold off him, God breathed life into him and he was raised from the dead.

“After that he made several appearances over a long period of time to different groups of people. These are his witnesses to all people.

“Barnabas and myself have been led here to bring this Good News. The promise made to our brothers and sisters has happened in our generation, in the risen Jesus. The Psalmist was talking about this when he wrote these words concerning Jesus.

“You are my son.
Today I have become your father”

“God promised that once raised from the dead Jesus could never die again. This is written in the scripture Isaiah 55:3 “I will award you with the sacred blessings that was promised to David.”

“The psalmist explained elsewhere in more detail when he wrote “You will not allow your holy one to rot in the grave.” Please note this is not about David because after he had served his time on earth doing the will of God he died, and was buried, his body became nothing. It is referring to someone else whom God bought back to life and whose body remained the same.

“Listen carefully brothers for there is forgiveness through this man Jesus. All those who believe in him are guilt free and are made right with God. The Jewish law couldn’t possibly do that.

“I am concerned that you don’t let the words the prophets have said apply to you for this is what they say.

““Look at yourself
You mockers, be stunned and amazed,
Lie down and die.”

“For in your generation I am about to do something you wouldn’t be able to believe even if you were told by someone.”

As Paul and Barnabas stood up to leave the place of worship the people who had heard them pleaded with them to return next week to finish the message. A great many Jews and converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas urging them, “By God’s grace remain faithful.”

The following week they returned and were amazed to see how many people had gathered to hear them. The news of the week before must have spread through out the city. The Jewish leaders didn’t like the fact that Paul and Barnabas attracted more people than they did and were jealous. *It is a natural feeling to be jealous when someone succeeds where*

you fail. It is also a tragedy when your jealousy stops Gods will. These Jewish leaders were trying to argue against every word spoken by Paul.

Then Paul and Barnabas stood up and spoke strongly and clearly. They explained that the Good News that came from God should really be given to you Jews first, but since you have called yourselves unworthy to receive eternal life. Now we will reach out to the Gentiles.

The Lord commanded us to do exactly this.

“You are a light to the Gentiles

To bring salvation to all corners of the earth.”

When the Gentiles who had gathered round heard this they were filled with gladness and joy and started to thank the Lord for the message he sent through Paul. All of them who was apparently set apart to receive eternal life became believers and the message started spreading through out the entire region.

The Jewish leaders wouldn’t accept the truth. They started to stir up trouble for Paul and Barnabas, throwing them out of town. They moved on shaking the dust from their feet which meant they had given the message the best they could. It was now up to them what they did with it. All the believers in that town had an incredible feeling of joy and the presence of the Holy Spirit fell upon them.

Chapter 14

Paul and Barnabas's next stop on their journey was Iconium. They entered the synagogue one Sabbath and spoke with great enthusiasm and a large number was converted. There was some Jews however who tried to come between the Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas by coming out with all kinds of evil sayings about them. They felt the need to stay and so they stayed a long time. They carried on preaching with great boldness the grace of the Lord. They received power to do miraculous signs and wonders so they could prove the message of the Lord is true.

Not everyone was convinced, they were divided amongst themselves in what they thought. *You are best to leave the convincing to the Holy Spirit. As we see here miracles don't convince everyone.* There was a group of men including Gentiles, Jews and some leaders who had come to the conclusion that they should attack these men and throw stones at them.

The people who sided with Paul and Barnabas over heard the plot to stone them and urged Paul and Barnabas to leave.

After that Paul and Barnabas journeyed to the cities of Lystra and Derbe. They carried on preaching the Good News.

During their stay at Lystra Paul and Barnabas came across a man who had been crippled all his life. His friends would carry him every week to the synagogue just so he could listen to Paul. One day as he was listening to Paul, Paul eyed him at the back where he always sat, realizing he had a strong faith and believing he would be healed. One day Paul put on his strong and powerful voice and shouted to the man "STAND UP." The man on hearing this immediately jumped to his feet. It was amazing, the man felt his legs gaining strength and he began walking around for the first time. The surrounding crowd who saw what was happening stood there in total silence, not even forming a word with their mouths. Once they had got over the unbelievable scene, started shouting in their local accent "These men are no humans, they're Gods." They thought Barnabas was the Greek God Zeus and because Paul was the main speaker they called him Hermes. It had been said in the history of Lystra that these well known Gods had made an appearance many years ago. No one welcomed them except one fairly old couple whom they rewarded, while destroying the rest. After seeing the miracles Paul and Barnabas were doing they thought the Gods had come back to give them a second chance and then, on remembering what happened on their last visit showered them with gifts.

When Paul and Barnabas got word of what was happening they were so angry they ripped their clothing and addressed the crowd in a laud voice. "Friends, why do you do this, can you not see, we are humans like yourselves, come to bring the Good News. Turn away from these worthless things and come to the true and living God who made all things. He allowed all nations to live their own lives in the earlier days but he

never left himself without a witness. You just got to open your eyes and just look around and you can see God at work, He watered the ground and feeds the animals and gives us joyful hearts and food.” Paul and Barnabas could hardly stop the people from sacrificing to them.

There was a group of Jews that had just arrived from Antioch and Iconium the places where they were planning to kill Paul and Barnabas before they escaped. They came to finish the job, turning the crowds against them. They started throwing stones at Paul. The stones came so fast he could hardly get to his feet and he was dragged out of the city along the dusty road. He was left half dead. The believers gathered around and to their amazement he got up and went back to the city for more. The next day he gathered all his belongings and left that city taking Barnabas with him. They headed for Derbe.

On arrival they entered the synagogues and started preaching the Good News about Jesus, telling them that salvation is for everyone. The citizens of Derbe welcomed Paul and Barnabas and they made a large number of disciples. After they had been in Derbe a while they decided to go back to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia. There they strengthened and encouraged the believers urging them to remain in their faith. *Paul and Barnabas knew the dangers they were walking into and yet they felt they had to help the small group of new believers.* They reminded the new believers the only way they can enter the kingdom of God is through many tribulations. Paul and Barnabas had a responsibility to strengthen the leadership of the church’s, so with the help of the Holy Spirit they chose a few men to play the role of elders. They laid their hands on them and prayed for them with fasting, giving them into the hands of the Lord who cares for them and in whom they have trusted. Paul and Barnabas went back to where they had been staying and gathered all their belongings and thanked the people for the hospitality shown. They were back on the road. They went through Pisidia, arriving at Pumphylia. They went into the synagogues in Pergu and started preaching again to strengthen the new believers. After a while they moved on to Attalia.

They finally arrived back in Antioch by ship, the place full of history for them, for that was the place they had begun their journey. They had also been entrusted by God to bring the Good News to all nations. When they arrived in Antioch they gathered all the church’s in one place and enlightened to them about the works of God on their trip and how the Gentiles were free to receive faith. They planned to remain in Antioch and encourage the believers there.

Chapter 15

While their stay in Antioch Paul and Barnabas came across a problem. There was some men who had come from Judea and had started to teach the Christians. They seemingly thought that Christians had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul and Barnabas along with the other church members knew the importance of the old testament law, but they also knew not to rely on the law to bring salvation.

Paul and Barnabas stuck by what they believed and disagreed with them when they were trying to get the Christians to follow the Jewish law of circumcision. They felt strong and argued with them. In the end they sent Paul and Barnabas along to Jerusalem. They also sent some local believers with them. They wanted to meet with the elders and apostles to discuss the matter in question. They were on their way to Jerusalem when they stopped to visit some more believers in Phoenicia and Samaria. The believers from these places were overjoyed when they heard that the Gentiles were being accepted and converted.

When they eventually got to Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas were extremely tired from their journey and the whole church gathered round to give them a warm welcome. They were encouraged to tell everyone God had been with them through their ministry. There was some converted Pharisees who shouted out “All these Gentiles that have been converted must abide by the law of Moses and have the outward sign, circumcision.”

They gathered together all the apostles and church elders for a meeting to discuss the matter. They had been in deep discussion after which Paul felt a strong urge to stand up. He addressed the crowd “Brothers, friends, have you forgotten that I was chosen by God some time ago to take the Good News to the Gentiles so they would believe. It was confirmed that God accepted the Gentiles when he poured his Holy Spirit upon them, the same way we received him. It doesn’t matter to God whether you’re a Jew or a Gentile for their hearts were also cleansed through faith. So answer me this why are you so keen to put the Gentiles under pressure to abide by the law when we are not able to bear it ourselves. It is understood that we have all been saved through the Lord Jesus.

The discussion finished and everyone was keen to listen to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the miraculous signs and wonders that God had been doing amongst the Gentiles believers through them.

When Paul and Barnabas speech had ended James, the brother of Jesus who became one of the leaders in the church of Jerusalem stood up and made his way to the front where he would be heard by the majority. He said “Brothers listen to me Peter has already mentioned to you the first time God had visited the Gentiles. He wanted to take from them a people for himself.

“Did you know that these converted Gentiles were what was predicted by the prophets for this is what is written in the book of Isaiah.

Afterward I will come back
And will build up the fallen kingdom of David
From what remains I will rebuild it
I will make it new
So that all the human creatures
May find the Lord
Gentiles included.
Whom I have called to be mine
These are words spoken by the Lord. These things were made known by him long ago.

“It is my understanding that we must leave those Gentiles who have found God alone, but we can communicate to them through letters telling them to be careful not to eat anything that they know which has been scarified to Idols and to keep away from sexual immorality and the meat and blood of an animal which has been strangled. The law of Moses has been read out in all Jewish gatherings in synagogues and all cities for many years.”

The church in Jerusalem decided they would choose some men to represent them, giving them the responsibility of handing over the letter to the Gentiles. They sent them along with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch of Syria. These men were Judas who was also called Barsabbas and Silas who later joined Paul on his travels.

They took with them this letter.

Dear Gentile believers

We bring you greetings from your brothers in Jerusalem.

We believe from what we have heard that you have been troubled and even saddened by the teaching of some men from here, may we just say they did it with no instructions from us. We have had a meeting to discuss the matter in question and have undoubtedly agreed that we should send these two men who will represent us and talk on our behalf. We are also sending you Paul and Barnabas who put their lives in a great deal of danger for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have sent Judas and Silas to report what we have agreed. It has come to our understanding that we should not give you any more burden other than these. You should avoid eating any food that has been offered to idols and stay away from blood and the meat from an animal who has been strangled. Sexual immorality is also forbidden. If you can manage this you will be doing well.

Yours in Christ
The Apostles and Elders in the Jerusalem Church.

The four of them arrived in Antioch. They sent word that all the Christians there should gather together for a meeting where they read the letter out to them. There was a feeling of great joy amongst the Christians

as they listened to the letter.

Judas and Silas who were well known prophets encouraged and strengthened the Christians to keep their faith. They stayed a while in Antioch. They had to report back to Jerusalem what had happened in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas decided they would stay around and help those who were in leadership, teaching and preaching, making known the word of the Lord.

Time seemed to come and go so fast. Paul and Barnabas had been in Antioch a long time and they felt it was time to move on. One morning while they were having their breakfast they were chatting away, having a laugh. In the midst of all this Paul says he wants to make another appearance in the cities where they have been to see how the new Christians are doing and to help them grow in faith. Barnabas thought that was a great idea, only he wanted to bring John Mark with them. A great friction arose between them. Paul disagreed strongly, he was not having the pleasure of John Marks company again after he deserted them before.

Later Mark became essential for Paul's other travels. They argued strongly and formed two teams they each went their own way. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed across the sea, landing in Cyprus while Paul chose Silas. The believers entrusted them to the Lord, prayed for their safety and sent them on their way. They made their way to Syria and Cilicia and encouraged the believers to grow stronger in their faith.

Chapter 16

Paul and his new travelling friend Silas reached the out skirts of Derbe, they stayed there a while before moving on to Lystra. While in Lystra they came face to face with a young man with the name of Timothy. His mother was Jew, his father a Greek. Timothy was influenced by his mother and grandmother in spite of having a non Christian as a father. He was a very popular person among the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Timothy must have made a good impression because as soon as Paul met him he asked him if he would like to join them on their travels.

Knowing his father was a Greek Paul asked Timothy if he would mind being circumcised. There was no need of this but Timothy agreed to do it. It helped him to overcome things that got in his way when witnessing for Christ. They had to explain the decision as decided by the people who made up the high council in Jerusalem in every town they went and the churches where they went were encouraged and made stronger in their faith. The numbers of believers grew daily.

One day Paul and Silas wanted to enter the province of Asia, but their timing was wrong and the Holy Spirit seemed to close the way. They had to go to the area of Phrygia and Galatia instead in the spreading of the gospel. The Holy Spirit would not allow them to enter the province of Bithynia and so they travelled through Mysia and ended up in the city of Troas.

One evening while they were staying with the believers in Troas the Holy Spirit gave Paul a vision in which he saw a man who seemed to be in such a bad way, he was begging on his hands and knees. He was saying "Please come and help us here in Macedonia." They could only presume that they had been guided to Macedonia so they left at once and began preaching there. Luke has now joined them on their travels.

They got all their belongings and boarded a boat and sailed from Troas. They slept soundly in their sleeping quarters and arrived at their destination the following morning. They got off the boat at Neapolis and journeyed inland till they arrived at Philippi one of the big cities in the Macedonia area. They had planned on staying there a while.

On one of the Sabbaths while they were there they decided to have a walk by the river which flowed just outside the city wall. While on their walk they came across some women who had gathered together for a prayer meeting and they joined them and started speaking to them. One of the women there was Lydia. She must have been very wealthy for she owned some purple cloth which in those days was very expensive. She listened to Paul and her heart was open to accept all what she heard. Paul led her down to the river and she was baptized along with others from her household. Then she pleaded for Paul and his company to come and stay with her. She kept pestering till they agreed to go with her.

While they were staying in Philippi they came across a young slave girl who

was possessed by an evil spirit. She foretold future events and made her masters very wealthy. *In those days being able to see into the future was common among the Greeks and Romans.* She kept following them shouting “These men will tell you how to be saved.” This went on for many days until Paul just couldn’t stand it any longer. He turned round and commanded the demon to leave her and immediately the demon left her. She fell to the floor weeping. She could no longer fore tell the future and her masters were furious. Their only way of becoming rich has now been taken from them. *There was nothing wrong with what the girl said, but the fact that she got the information from an evil spirit made it worst.* The masters of the young girl realizing what had happened grabbed Paul and Silas by the arm. “What have we done, let go, you’re hurting me” said Paul. They tightened their grip on his arm and continued to drag them. “Where are you taking us” said Paul and Silas together. “Where you think, to the authorities. They can do what they want with you” said the man.

When they arrived before the authorities the masters of the young girl were very annoyed and shouted out things about Paul and Silas. Blaming them for the uproar the city was in. They even said that Paul and Silas were teaching and instructing things that were against Roman customs. Those in the market place who heard all this quickly formed a mob against them. Then some men ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped down to their undies. They were told to beat them up with wooden rods. Paul and Silas were in a very bad way after being severely beaten. They were black and blue, sores all over, with a puddle of blood under them.

They were thrown into prison and had their feet clamped in the stocks which were used for the highly dangerous criminals. The jailer was ordered to keep a close watch on them and make sure they didn’t escape.

It was very late and the other prisoners were trying to sleep, but were kept awake. Paul and Silas were having a fun time praying and singing hymns to God. The other prisoners listened with stunned ears. After all they’ve been through they can still sing praises to God the Father. There was an earthquake and the ground shook beneath them and all the cell doors were opened and the chains miraculously fell off. The jailer got to his feet after waking up. He saw all the doors were open and he thought the prisoners had escaped. He was about to take his own life when he heard someone shout behind him “Don’t do it! We are all here.” *The jailer was about to kill himself because he was responsible for the prisoners and if they had escaped he would have got blamed.*

The Jailer was shaking with fear and asked for the lights to be switched on. He ran to where he was holding Paul and Silas (the dark, creepy dungeon) and fell to the floor. He led them out and asked “What must I do to be saved?”

They gave him this answer “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you and all your household will be saved.” *They took this opportunity to share with him and all his household the word of the Lord.* While they were sharing the

Good News, the jailer started to bathe their wounds.

“This may sting a little.” The jailer said as he dabbed the sores. His entire household including servants were baptized straight away. The jailer invited Paul and Silas into his home and asked the cook to prepare a meal for them. There was a whole lot of rejoicing because everyone had come to faith in God.

When they woke up the next morning the prison officer came face to face with a police man who had been sent to tell him that these prisoners are free to go. When the prison officer told Paul and Silas that they were free to go they made it quite clear they were staying put. Paul stood with power in his voice and said “They have given us a great beating and didn’t even give us a trial before throwing us in prison, we are citizens of Rome and now they want us to go in secret. I will not let them get away with this. They will have to come and drag me out themselves.”

When word had reached the city Officials that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens they came to see them and apologized for the way they treated them and begged them to go in peace. They returned to the home of Lydia and met with other believers strengthening and encouraging them in their faith, before moving on.

Chapter17

Paul and Silas went on their way, the road was muddy and slippery. They past through some places before they landed in Thessalonica. When they arrived they found a Jewish synagogue and slipped quietly in. Paul felt an urge to speak up. He started explaining the Old Testament and how the prophecies about the messiah were fulfilled in Jesus. *When you are witnessing it is best if you start at their level of understanding then gradually move on.* He says, “You know this Jesus fellow I’ve been talking to you about well he’s the messiah.” He was stunned by the reactions of those that had heard him and quite a large number of them were persuaded to join the converts.

The Jewish leaders didn’t like the attention Paul and Silas were receiving and they were jealous of them. They went out into the streets to gather a bunch of strong men to form a mob and cause trouble for them. Paul and Silas were staying with a local man called Jason. The crowd that had gathered knew this and stormed over to where Jason lived. They broke down the door and demanded a terrified Jason “Where are they.” They couldn’t find Paul and Silas so they grabbed Jason instead along with some other believers. They took them to face the city leaders in the market square. The spokesman shouted out “Paul and Silas have come into our city trying to bring news of another king, Jesus and these men have invited them into their home. They are all guilty of betraying the trust of Caesar for they have put their trust in another, Jesus.”

The people in the city were all confused when the report reached them. Jason managed to find enough cash to pay for his freedom and he posted bail, but he had to promise that the trouble would come to an end or all he owns will be taken, including his life.

The believers saw that Paul and Silas were at risk if they remained in the city so they helped them pack their belongings and sent them on their way. When they arrived at Berea they received a warm welcome. They were so tired that they clapsed on to the bed after the long journey. The next Sabbath they were asked to speak in the synagogue. They found it easier to speak to the people of Berea because they seemed to accept everything Paul was saying. They checked the scriptures every day to see if Paul and Silas were telling the truth. The conclusion was that many became believers.

When the news of what Paul was doing in Berea reached the Jews of Thessalonica they were filled with hatred and anger. They chose some men to go to Berea to cause trouble. The believers saw what was happening and sent Paul on his way with some others. They headed towards the coast of Athens. When Paul found his lodgings he sent a message for Silas and Timothy to join him.

On the days Paul was alone in Athens he took a slow walk around the city. He was saddened by what he saw, everywhere he looked there were stone idols that the locals worshipped.

The people of Athens were well educated and they loved to learn new things. While Paul was staying there he used the opportunity to tell them about their creator. He entered the synagogue on the next Sabbath and had a discussion with the Jews and the Gentiles who feared God. He even did an open air speech every day in the town to whoever happened to be around at the time.

On Paul's travels he met with some Epicureans and stoic philosophers from the local school of philosophy and had a debate with them. When he started telling them about Jesus, his life, how he was raised from the dead, they said among themselves "This man has some strange ideas." There were others who thought he was pushing some foreign religion on them.

They took him to the market to meet the gathering of philosophers. The spokesman said to him "Please tell us more of this new religion. You say this man came back to life, the blind can see, the lame can walk, this is amazing stuff. We would like to know what it's all about."

All those in Athens including the visitors were keen to discuss the latest ideas.

Paul stood and spoke to this gathering addressing them as follows, "Men of Athens I see you are very religious, for as I took a walk around your city I noticed there were a lot of alters made of stone. I think if I remember rightly I saw one which had an inscription chiselled into the stone which said "To an unknown God." Let me tell you, you have been worshiping him and yet you didn't know who he was. I would like now to tell you about him. *Paul used this inscription to point them in the right direction, to the true and living God.*

Paul, then went on to explain that, "He is the God who brought everything we see into existence. He is Lord of heaven and earth and doesn't dwell in man made temples. God is the creator and no human hands can serve his needs. He gives everything he created the breath of life and provides all our needs. He created all nations on earth through just one man (Adam). If he created everything he knows before hand which of the nations will rise and which will fall, he also knows where each nation will end.

The reason God did this was that he wanted all the nations to find their way to him. God is not far away for it is in him we live and move and have our being. I have heard one of your poets say "We are his children." Since this is true we shouldn't allow our thoughts to think that God is something that man can make. God, now commands that people everywhere put away their man made Gods and turn to the living God. For he has a day planned when he will judge the world with justice by a man whom he has

appointed, proved who this man is by bringing him back to life.”

When Paul had finished speaking, those who had heard him thought he was out of his mind especially when he spoke of a person, being dead one minute then alive the next. They thought it was very funny so they laughed among themselves. There were some who wanted to hear more of what Paul was speaking about another time. Paul had a mixed reaction some made fun of him and others wanted to know more. *This didn't put Paul off, he continued for he knew it was more important that they know the truth.* It would be up to them what they did with the truth. There were some who joined him and became believers.

Chapter 18

Paul packed all of his belongings and said “Bye bye” to the family who showed him hospitality in Athens. Thanking them, Paul made his way to Corinth. Where he had a warm welcome. A midst all this he met a Jewish man called Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They had been chased out of Italy. It was because of Claudius Caesars, for he had instructed all Jews to be driven out of Rome. They asked Paul to stay with them. He was able to help them with their business, tent making as that was his trade. While Paul was in Corinth he found a Synagogue each Sabbath, in which he tried to convince the Jews and Greeks alike. While he was there his companions Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia. When they had joined him Paul was busy trying to testify to the Jews saying “Jesus Christ is the Messiah you are looking for.” The Jews would not accept this statement and ridiculed Paul. Paul had had enough and shook the dust off his robe and said “Since you wont accept Jesus as your Messiah I will go to the Gentiles. Paul got invited to stay next door to the Synagogue in the home of Titius Justus. He was one of the Gentiles who worshiped God.

There were many in Corinth who became believers among these was Crispus who was a leader of the Synagogue and all who lived with him. They were baptized in the river. In the night Paul had a vision in which he heard the voice of the Lord. The Lord spoke gently to him saying “Don’t be fearful, don’t be quiet. I need you to speak out. I am with you and no harm will come to you, for there are many people in this city who are my children.” Paul stayed in Corinth a while teaching Gods word.

When Galio was appointed governor of Achaio there were some Jews who formed a mob against Paul. They had him dragged for judgment before the governor. They were accusing Paul of getting people to worship God in different ways. Paul was about to speak in his defence when Galio took his accusers to one side and said “If this case involved some wrong works or a deadly crime I would take the case, but as it is neither of these I don’t want to get involved. You handle it between yourselves.” He ordered them out of the courtroom.

The mob that was formed went on a hunt, looking everywhere for the leader of the synagogue, Sosthenes. When they had found him they beat him up and left him half dead in the courtroom. Galio wasn’t at all interested in what was happening.

After all this commotion Paul stayed a bit longer in Corinth and when it was time for him to leave he embraced his brothers and sisters he had met there and said good bye to them. He took Priscilla and Aquila down to the harbour and booked three spaces on a boat sailing to Syria. While at Cencurea Paul became a baldy. *It was Jewish custom to have his hair shaved off.*

When they finally pulled into the harbour at Ephesus they tied the boat up and stepped ashore. Paul left his companions talking among themselves.

He found a Synagogue and went to have a discussion with the Jews. The Jews in the Synagogue wanted him to stay. They wanted to continue their discussion with him. He told them he had to go but will return at a later time if it's what God wants. Paul returned to see his companions who had not moved from the boat. His companions waved to him as he went out to sea for they would be going out to sea soon.

Paul sailed to the port of Caesarea. He travelled across land to Jerusalem to see how the churches there were getting on. They had planted a church there on their last visit and he wanted to check it out. Paul then made his way back to his home town Antioch. He caught up with his friends and family telling them what he had been doing and what he had discovered.

He stayed with his family a while before he travelled on visiting churches in Galatia and Phrygia. Paul went to encourage the believers to keep their faith strong and to help them grow in the Lord.

Meanwhile back in Ephesus a knowledgeable Jew by the name of Apollos had arrived from Egypt. He was a man of good words and he knew the scriptures well. He spoke about Jesus, all he knew, with great enthusiasm. However he did not know about Jesus' life, crucifixion and resurrection. He only heard what John the Baptist had said about the need for repentance. He did not even know about the Holy Spirit. While he was speaking in the synagogue one Sabbath Priscilla and Aquila were there and they heard him. They thought to themselves this man his speaking with great boldness but he doesn't know the whole message. After he had finished speaking Priscilla and Aquila invited him to come home with them and they made his knowledge about Jesus complete and explained to him the way of salvation.

Apollos thought he might go to Achaia. The believers from Ephesus gave him their support and sent a letter ahead to the believers in Achaia asking them to welcome him with open arms and encourage him to speak with confidence. When he got there he was overwhelmed by the warm welcome he received. To those who had believed by Gods grace he proved to be a powerful speaker. He used the scriptures when in debate with the Jews to explain to them "The messiah you have been searching for is Jesus."

Chapter 19

Appollos was in Corinth speaking to the believers there and Paul was on horse back travelling through towns and cities until he reached Ephesus. There he met a handful of believers. He asked them what seemed to be an odd question to ask. “Did the Holy Spirit come upon you when you believed?”

They wondered what he was talking about and in their reply said “No, we don’t know what you mean. What is the Holy Spirit? We haven’t heard that there is one.”

In answer to that he was curious to know what baptism they received. “Excuse me,” he said with a puzzled look on his face. “What baptism did you receive?”

One of the men answered him. “It was the baptism of John.” Then Paul explained to them that John’s baptism was to show us a desire to turn away from sin and turn to God. John wanted people to believe in Jesus. He was only preparing the way for him. When they heard and understood what Paul was saying they were baptized again only this time in the name of the Lord Jesus. After Paul had laid his hands upon each of them they received the power of the Holy Spirit and they started prophesying and speaking a language only known by God.

While Paul was in Ephesus he entered the Synagogue and he began speaking with great boldness about the kingdom of God. He did this for the next three months. There were some who didn’t like what Paul was saying and spoke up against the Way. Paul had had enough, he didn’t want to hear any more so he walked out. He was followed shortly afterwards by a small group of believers. He took them to the local school and found an empty lecture hall where he preached daily the Lord’s message. He did this for the next two years. People came from all around to hear Paul, both Jews and Greeks alike.

God gave Paul the ability to do amazing, unheard of, miracles. When a handkerchief or a piece of material which had touched his skin had been placed on the sick they were instantly healed of deadly illnesses and the demons would flee.

A small group of Jews, highly educated were travelling from place to place getting rid of any evil spirits. They tried using the name of Jesus to drive these spirits away. One of them went over to a demon possessed man and said “In the name of Jesus, which Paul preaches about I command you to come out.” The spirit within the man replied “I have knowledge of Jesus and Paul but I don’t know who you are.” The man attacked them vigorously tore off their coverings and beaten them up and they hurried away in the nude with many cuts and bruises. *These men were jealous of Paul because he was doing all these miracles through the Holy Spirit. They thought they could use Jesus’ name like a magic charm, but it didn’t*

work out as they planned. God only works through those he chooses.

The story of what happened to them men travelled through all Ephesus like a fire which has gone out of control. The fear of the Lord fell upon the city and the name of the Lord Jesus was honored. Those who became believers owned up to the sinful practices they used to do. Those who had been practicing magic and sorcery brought their books of spells and threw them on to the bonfire and watched with eagerness as all their hard work became a pile of ashes. The Lords message had an overwhelming effect as it reached different groups of people.

Paul felt the Holy Spirit telling him to move on to Macedonia and Achaia before heading back to Jerusalem. “Then I must go to Rome. You two go on ahead to Macedonia and I’ll join you later,” he addressed his travelling companions Timothy and Erastus. “I want to stay here a while longer.”

There was serious trouble through out the region of Ephesus concerning those who followed Christ about that time. You see there was a silversmith who went by the name of Demetrius, he had a large business in which he worked with silver to make duplicates of the Greek Goddess Artemis. His business employed many crafts men. He gathered all his employees and others from related businesses and he held a meeting. He took his place up front and spoke with great reverence.

“Gentlemen, you know this business is our only source of income and this man Paul is saying that these gods we are manufacturing are not really gods.” *He was concerned because what Paul was saying happened to threaten their profit.* They knew if people started to believe in God their business would start to go down hill. He continued by saying, “This is happening throughout the world, I am not here just to complain about the respect we have lost. I am also concerned that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will lose its influence and that Artemis who is worshiped throughout the world would be robbed of her prestige.”

Their anger boiled over in their spirits and they started shouting at the top of their lungs. “**GREAT IS ARTEMIS OF THE EPHESIANS.**” There was quite a gathering and confusion flooded the whole city. Everyone made their way to the amphitheatre pushing and shoving as they squeezed through the doors. Gaius and Aristarchus who travelled with Paul from Macedonia were dragged along to the amphitheatre.

“I’m going in,” said Paul who was determined to get to the bottom of this. “You can’t we wont allow you,” said the believers as they struggled to hold him back. Some of Paul friends had sent a message begging him not to put his life in danger by entering the building.

There was a lot of commotion coming from inside. People were shouting different things at the same time and the building flooded with confusion. Many of the people didn’t know why they had even bothered to turn up.

The riot inside was getting out of control. The Jews pushed Alexander (their spokes person) to the front. He stood on the stage and demanded

silence throughout the amphitheatre. He tried to explain that the Jews had no part in the Christian community. When they came to the conclusion that this Alexander was a Jew they started shouting again. It lasted at least two hours. **“GREAT IS ARTEMIS OF THE EPHESIANS.”** The Mayor scrambled through the gathering he climbed onto the raised platform at the front and motioned with his hands for silence. Once the shouting had died down and he was able to be heard he spoke to them. **“Citizens of Ephesus.”** He paused a while before continuing. **“Everyone knows that the people here have authority to protect the temple of the goddess Artemis whom it is said fell down to us from the heavens. This is a case that is not able to be denied. Please don’t do anything rash. You have dragged these men here, but what have they taken from the temple, nothing. They haven’t even spoken a harsh word against our goddess. If this man,”** he dragged Demetris to the front. **“Has any case against these men he can take them to court and the Judge can choose the verdict. Any other complaints about different matters can be settled in a lawful way.**

There is no need for all this commotion and I am rather scared that we might be charged for making trouble by the Roman Government. And What will we say if we get asked for an explanation. You may go now.”

The gathering crowd broke up as people got on with their daily activities.

Chapter 20

When all this commotion was coming to an end Paul was convinced it was time to move on. He met what believers there were in their place of worship and encouraged them to stay strong in their faith. He embraced them all as brothers and said good bye as he set off towards Macedonia. On the road between Ephesus and Macedonia he would stop off at places along the way, encouraging the believers. He went on from there to Greece and stayed with the believers for three months. While Paul was in Greece he spent a lot of time in Corinth, where he found time to write a letter to Rome. *Paul had not yet visited Rome yet he knew a church had formed.* Paul showed compassion and explained the meaning of faith and salvation.

Paul was in the harbour preparing his boat for sail when he overheard some Jews plotting to harm him and he changed his mind. He decided to return through Macedonia.

The men who were Paul's travelling companions represented churches which he had started and they each had an offering which they had collected from the members of their church. They were going to present it to the Jerusalem church. It gave the gift a personal touch when the men gave it in person. The body of believers was stronger than ever. They could report back how God was working through their giving.

Paul told them to go on ahead to Troas and they would meet up again there. When the Passover season was over Paul and Luke got ready to board a ship in the small harbour at Phillipi in Macedonia. The journey took five days and they finally arrived at Troas. They stayed there for a week.

One day they got all the believers together. They all gathered to share the Lord's supper. Paul spoke for hours in a warm and stuffy room. It was midnight before he finished. The room where they were had lots of candles and there were far too many people for the size of the room which made it feel warm. While Paul spoke there was a young boy by the name of Eutychus who found it really hard to keep awake. He was sat on the windowsill, his eyes were getting heavy. *The combination of the heat and the fact that Paul spoke for a long time would have this effect on the people.* Eutychus fell asleep and fell out of the window. They were on the third floor. Everyone was trying to see through the window. They saw the young boy lying on the ground. The boy's parents thought he was dead and was weeping.

Paul, who was concerned went down to see if the boy was ok, lifting him up he looked up at the window where many heads were observing the view and shouted "Don't worry, he's alive." they returned back to the room for the Lord's Supper. Paul spoke some more before leaving. Meanwhile the young boy was escorted home, he was unhurt.

Paul had told his travelling companions to go on ahead and they sailed to Assos. While Paul went across country where they eventually met each

other. They boarded a ship and sailed to Mitylene. It took three days and on the way they passed the Island of Kios and the Island of Samos before finally arriving at Miletus.

Paul didn't want to visit Ephesus this time. He had already spent enough time in the province of Asia. He desperately wanted to get to Jerusalem in time for the festival of Pentecost as he had missed attending the Passover. On arrival at Miletus Paul sent one of his companions with a message to the elders of the Ephesus church asking them to join them.

When the elders of the Ephesus church had arrived he called a meeting. "You know I have never stopped sharing the message since I first stepped on to the province of Asia until now. I have done the Lord's work humbly and with tears. I have endured trials and suffering from the plots the Jews arranged against me. I have never given up nor have I stopped telling you the truth. I have just one message for both Jews and Gentiles and that is to be done with sin and turn to God and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

I am now on my way to Jerusalem, drawn there uncontrollably by the Holy Spirit. I don't know what waits for me there. All I know is wherever I go the Holy Spirit has revealed to me that trial and suffering lie ahead. My life is worth nothing unless I use it to do the work given to me by the Lord Jesus, telling others about the Good News of the never ending love and kindness of God." *What Paul put into life was far more important than what he got out of it. All he wanted was to share the message and do God's work.*

"I know now that you who have heard me preach the kingdom will never set eyes on me again. Let me say this I have been completely faithful with you and no one can blame me for their own damnation. I didn't stop declaring all that God wanted for you.

"Now don't forget to feed and look after one another, remember you belong to God. You made up the church purchased with his blood. You have been made elders by the Holy Spirit.

"Watch out for there will be false teachers who will come among you like vicious wolves when I'm gone. Some of you will even take the truth and alter it, change it somehow in order to draw a following crowd.

"Keep watch and remember them years I spent with you. I was constantly watching over you and cared deeply for you night and day. I even shed a few tears for you.

"Now I am to leave you in God's capable hands and allow his message to strengthen and build you up as you receive an inheritance with those who has been set apart for himself.

"Anyone's money or fine clothing, I have not lust for. My own hands have worked hard and I have even provided for my companions. The way I am is an example to show you that you can help the poor just by working hard.

Remember the words spoken by our Lord Jesus “It is far more blessed to give than to receive.”

When he had come to the end of his speech he went down on his knees and prayed with them. Tears were shed as each of them gave him a hug. They were sad mostly because they wouldn’t see him again. When they said their farewells they went with him down to the ship.

Chapter 21

Paul and his companions set sail for the Island of Cos. They reached Rhodes the next day and went from there to Patora. At Patora they got on board a ship and sailed to Phoenicia. They saw the island of Cyprus and pasted it. They pulled into the harbour of Tyre where every one went ashore and they stayed a week with the local believers. The Holy Spirit warned the disciples of the suffering that lay ahead for Paul and jumped to the wrong conclusion and therefore prophesied that he should not go to Jerusalem. When the week was over they went back to the ship. Everyone including wives and children joined them on the shore where Paul and his companions prayed on their knees and embraced his brothers and sisters with hugs. A few tears were shed as they waved good bye. They returned to their homes as Paul and his companions boarded a ship.

They came to Ptolemais where they were welcomed warmly by the brothers and sisters there. They had to leave the next day. They went to a place called Caesarea. Paul and his companions stayed with Philip, the one who had been chosen to distribute food. He was an evangelist who had four unmarried daughters, they had the gift of prophecy. *The gift of prophecy is given to both men and women. God can use women to do his work.*

During their stay they came across a man from Judea called Agabus. He also had the gift of prophecy. He took Paul's belt and used it to tie his hands and feet up with it. Then he said "The Holy Spirit has told me this is what will happen to the owner of this belt when he arrives in Jerusalem and they will hand you over to the Romans."

After hearing this those that were with Paul as well as the locals were scared for his safety and begged him not to go. Paul turned to them and said "Why the tears? You're breaking my heart. I know what will happen to me when I get to Jerusalem but I am now ready to suffer and even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus." *A faithful disciple wants above everything else, he wants to do what pleases God.*

When they couldn't change his mind they said "May the will of the Lord be done." They gathered their belongings and made the journey along the dusty road towards Jerusalem. There were some brothers from Caesarea who travelled with them.

Paul and his companions were taken to the home of Mnason. This man came from Cyprus originally and was a disciple. They received a warm welcome from all the believers in Jerusalem.

After they had their breakfast the next day they went to meet James, Jesus' brother who was the leader of the Jerusalem church. All the elders gathered together and greeted them warmly. Paul told them in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry

When they had heard this they stood in awe and sang praises to God. Then they added “Brother you know thousands of Jews have also believed and they live by the law of Moses.

There was a rumour that somehow had reached the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem saying that Paul was teaching the Jews to turn their back on the Law of Moses. That he wouldn’t even allow Jews to perform the outward sign of circumcision. But of course all this nonsense was not true.

“What are we going to do? It wont be long before they get word that you are here.” They were feared for Paul’s safety. They put a suggestion forward saying, “These four men have made a vow, they are getting ready to have their heads shaved off go with these men and offer to pay some of the required costs and have your own head shaved too. Then everyone will realise these rumours that are going around are not true.” Paul agreed to take part in this Jewish custom to keep the peace in the Jerusalem church. *Sometimes churches can be torn in two over minor disagreements, we should be like Paul and know what are important essentials and remain firm in them. The non-essentials, we should have the ability to be flexible with them.*

“Now then for the Gentile Christians among you nothing has changed. You have already been told in a letter but I will remind you. You must not eat food that has been offered to idols neither are you to consume blood or eat the meet of a strangled animal. Stay away from sexual immorality.”

That next day Paul was led by four men into the temple to take part in the purification ritual. After he had done that he made a public announcement declaring the date when their vow would end and sacrifices would be offered for each of them.

The week had nearly finished when some troubled Jews recognised Paul in the temple. They all gathered together and formed a mob against him. They grabbed him by the scruff of his neck shouting, “Hay you men of Israel this here is the man who tells everyone not to obey the Jewish law. He even speaks ill of the temple and has made the temple unclean by bringing gentiles in. (Earlier that day Paul was seen talking to a gentile called Trophimus and they thought he had bought him into the temple).

All the people who live in the city were shocked by what they had heard and they formed various riots. They grabbed Paul by the arm and dragged him out of the temple, the gates immediately shut behind him. As they were beating Paul in an attempt to kill him the commander who was Claudius Lysias a Roman official got word there was an uproar in the whole of Jerusalem. That moment he gathered his soldiers and ran down towards where all the fighting was taking place. When they saw the commander coming with his men they immediately threw Paul aside, the helpless body all bruised and sore. The commander ordered that Paul be arrested and asked the crowd who is this man and what has he done. There were a load of different answers flying through the air towards him. With all the uproar in the city, the truth was hard to come by.

He had Paul taken to the fortress. The mob grew so violent that Paul had to be lifted to the soldiers shoulders to keep him safe and the crowd was shouting from behind “Kill him, kill him.”

As they were standing on the steps just outside the door Paul turned to the commander, “May I have a word with you please.”

The commander asked Paul if he knew Greek then he asked if he were the Egyptian who, some time ago led a rebellion and took roughly four thousand of the Assassins out into the desert.

Paul looked at the commander and he answered him, “No I am a Jew from Tarsus a very impenitent city in Cilicia. May I please speak with these people.”

“Yes you may,” agreed the commander. Paul turned round on the stairs, raised his hands in an attempt to quietened the crowd and a wave of silence soon buried the whole crowd. He spoke to them in their own language, Aramaic.

Chapter 22

“Brothers and those respected fathers.” Paul addressed the crowd. “Listen while I offer my own defence.” When they heard the words Paul spoke they were amazed because they understood him, Paul used their language to show that he was a devout Jew and that he had total respect for all Jewish customs. The silence became deeper still and he continued. “I myself am a Jew and was born in Tarsus, the most famous city in Cilicia. I was raised up here in Jerusalem. The well known, well respected Gamalier taught me all I know. I learned to follow all our Jewish laws and customs with care. I was eager to please God in everything I do just like you today. I bought pain and hardship upon those that followed The Way even throwing them in prison, women and children alike, some I arranged to be stoned to death. The high priest and the council leaders can tell you that I speak the truth. They had compiled a letter for me to deliver to our Jewish brothers in Damascus ordering me to find the Christians and dragged them to Jerusalem to be punished. As we were on the road we came to a sudden stop. There was a bright light, so bright I fell to the ground. I heard a voice saying to me “Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me.

“I trembled with fear and asked who it was that had spoken and the voice spoke again, “It is I Jesus the one you are persecuting.” My travelling companions were dazzled by the bright light but they couldn’t hear the voice. I asked “What must I do Lord?” The Lord told me to get up and continue on my way to Damascus where I was told what to do.

“The bright light had blinded me so my companions had to lead me. When I got to Damascus a man who went by the name of Ananias. He was a man who believed in God and well respected by the Jews. He found me and he said “Brother Saul receive your sight.” Immediately my sight came back and I could see again.

“Then he explained to me that the God of our ancestors has chosen me to have knowledge of his will and to see with my own eyes the most holy one and my ears will be opened to hear him speaking. He said I must take this message throughout the whole world telling people everywhere the things I have seen and heard. There’s not a moment to lose, I got up and was baptized, my sins were washed away and I called on the name of the Lord.

“One day while I was in Jerusalem I went into the temple to pray. I fell into a trance. A vision came to me, it was Jesus telling me to leave Jerusalem quickly. “The people here will not believe you when you share with them your testimony concerning me.” I answered him “But Lord, the people certainly know that I persecuted those that followed you, throwing them into prison. I was watching when your witness Stephen was killed.

“The Lord answered me and said “Go away from Jerusalem for I will send you to the Gentiles.”

The crowd listened with keen interest until Paul mentioned Gentiles. When they heard that word their attitude suddenly changed and anger

swelled up inside them. They shouted with one voice “Away with this man, he’s not in his right mind, kill him.” They threw their coats off in disgust and tossed handfuls of dust in the air.

These people were meant to be a light to the Gentiles, telling them about the one true God, instead they became racial towards them but that didn’t stop Gods plans to reach the Gentile world. They were hearing the Good news anyway through his servants Peter and Paul.

The commander grabbed Paul by his arm and pulled him in through the open doorway. He gave orders to those inside to lash out at him with whips, he urged him to tell them what crime he had committed. He wanted to know what had caused the sudden uproar of the people. They had just tied Paul up and were about to whip him when he turned towards the officer, he looked him right in the eyes and spoke to him. “Is it legal for you to whip a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been tried?” The officer stopped what he was doing and went to find the commander and he says, “Hang on a minute we can’t do this. He’s a Roman citizen.” Then the commander asked Paul if he were a Roman citizen and Paul answered “Yes I am.”

“I am too,” the commander said “But I bought my citizenship.”
“It didn’t cost me anything for I was born a citizen,” replied Paul.

The soldiers stopped what they were doing and stood back once they heard he was from Rome. The commander hid his face in his hands terrified because he was the one who had ordered him to be tied up and whipped.

The commander ordered that Paul should be set free from the chains that bound him. He also ordered the leading priests to form a meeting with the Jewish high council.

Chapter 23

Paul fixed his eyes on the high council and said, “Brothers I have always lived before God in all good conscience.”

The high priest who was called Ananias instantly commanded those who were standing near to Paul to slap him on the mouth so as to stop him from talking. Paul turned to face Ananias and he said to him “God will slap you, you whitewash wall. What kind of judge are you to break the law yourself by ordering me struck like that?”

Those standing near to Paul were disgusted by the way Paul spoke to Ananias and they said, “Excuse me but do you not know that is not the way to speak to Gods high priest?”

I am so sorry, I didn’t know,” replied Paul. “For it is said in the scriptures do not speak evil of anyone who rules over you.”

Paul didn’t recognize Ananias as a high priest, this is because his command broke the law he was meant to represent. Christians are meant to represent Christ in everything we do. If someone says to you “I didn’t know you were a Christian,” then we have failed to represent Christ.

Paul became aware that there was a mixture of Sadducee's and Pharisees that made up the high council. He shouted out with great boldness, “I am a Pharisee like the rest of my ancestors. I stand on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead.”

The difference between these two groups of religious leaders was that the Pharisees believe in the resurrection, the Sadducee's did not. They only believed in the five books of Moses which has no mention of the resurrection. We should be like Paul always ready to give our testimony. The Holy Spirit will guide us to speak the right words with boldness. The council was divided and there was a fight between the Pharisees and the Sadducee's. The Sadducee's say there is no such thing as the resurrection, angels or spirits, but the Pharisees believe in all of these. The shouts began. Some of the Pharisees jumped to their feet and shouted, “There's nothing wrong with this man.” They sensed that Paul was guided by an angel or a spirit. The shouts of the two groups grew louder and louder. They were pulling Paul from both sides. He thought his body would split in two and his arms will drop off.

The commander eventually put a stop to the tugging, scared they would tear him apart, he ordered his men to remove him from their reach and return him back to the fortified place. Just as Paul was settling down for the night The Lord paid him a visit and said to him, “Be encouraged, Paul, for now you have told people here in Jerusalem about me, you must do the same in Rome.”

The next morning a group of more than forty Jews had gathered together, they had taken an oath not to eat or drink anything until they had put an end to Paul's life. They went looking for the leaders and told them what they had done saying "We have bound ourselves with an oath not to eat or drink so much as a drop before we catch up with Paul and make his days on earth cut short. Soon after the Pharisees/Sadducee's arguments had died down they were already planning another murder, but as always God is in control.

They said to the leaders unaware that they were being overheard, "You should ask the commander to have Paul bought back to the council, say you want to examine his case again and we will jump him on his way and kill him. *Isn't it amazing to see how God puts people in a place just at the right time. He used Paul's nephew to save Paul's life.*

Paul's nephew was placed within earshot and so heard what they were planning to do to Paul. He ran as fast as his little legs could carry him to where Paul was being held and he said, "Uncle I have just overheard some men, they want to kill you. They say they will ask the commander to have you bought back pretending they want to examine your case further, they will be hiding along the way and will kill you."

Paul called over one of the officers and told him to take this young man to see the commander. He has something important to say to him.

The officer did as Paul had told him. He explained to the commander that Paul had called him over, telling him to bring this young man before you for he has something important to tell you.

The commander took the young man by the upper part of his arm and had a one to one chat.

"What's so important that you had to tell me." Paul's nephew explained that some Jews will ask you to have Paul bought before the High Council pretending they want to examine his case further. But I beg you please don't do it. There will be over forty men hiding along the way. They will be waiting for him to pass and then they will jump on him and kill him.

"You mustn't let another soul know you have told me this," the commander warned the young man and sent him on his way.

The commander called over two of his officers and he told them, "Could you get two hundred soldiers and be ready for nine o'clock, as that's the time we are to leave for Caesarea. And could you also take two hundred spearmen and about seventy horsemen. Give one of the horses to Paul so he could ride and deliver him safely to Governor Felix."

The Commander went to his office and put pen to paper and wrote a letter to the governor. *When God intervenes things will work out better than what we could imagine. God works in amazing ways. He chose the Roman army to save Paul and to take him safely to Caesarea.*

Dear Governor Felix

I bring you greetings. This man was held by some Jews who were about to kill him and I arrived just in time. I heard that he was a Roman citizen and had him moved to safety. I bought him before their high council, I found out it was something regarding their religious law and nothing deserving the death penalty or held captive. When I was told of a plot to kill him, I sent him to you and told his accusers they will have to bring their charges before you.

From Claudius Lysias.

That night the soldiers did as they were told and took Paul as far as Antipatris where they left him with the horse men who continued the journey to Caesarea. On arrival they took Paul along with the letter to Governor Felix. He unrolled the letter and read the contents and then he asked Paul this question. "What province are you from?" Paul's reply was "Cilicia."

The Governor continued, he had a look of understanding in his eyes and said "I will listen to your case from those who are accusing you when they arrive. He then ordered Paul to be held in a jail cell.

Chapter 24

After waiting five days Paul's case was brought before the governor, Ananius had arrived bringing Tertullus a lawyer and other Jewish leaders. When Paul was sent for the lawyer gave these false accusations before the Governor saying "Your Excellency the Jews here have been given peace and you have changed the law to make it better for us. For that we are totally grateful to you. I don't want to bore you but if I could have your attention for a brief moment while I outline this man's case before you."

The Lawyer made three accusations against Paul. The first thing he said was that he was a troublemaker always getting into fights with Jews around the world. Secondly he is a ring leader for an unrecognized religious sect a group who follow The Way and have no time for Roman laws. Thirdly he was even trying to defile the temple when he was arrested.

The other Jews supported these accusations and stood up to confirm all that Tertullus had spoken was the truth.

The governor wanted to hear from Paul what he thought so he motioned with his hands for Paul to speak openly.

Paul begins his defence "I know that you have been judging what the Jews do for a number of years now, this helps me to speak more openly in my defence. I arrived in Jerusalem about twelve days ago to worship in the temple. There I didn't argue with any one, I didn't even start a fight in the temple or out on the streets of this magnificent city. These men have no proof to support these accusations." Paul uses his defence as an opportunity to witness for Christ he concludes by saying, "I have to admit that I am a follower of The Way which these men have described to you as a sect. I worship the God of our ancestors. I strongly believe the Jewish laws and all things which we find written in the books of prophecy. My hope is in God just like these men have that both the righteous and the ungodly will be raised on the day of Judgment. For this reason I always try to keep a clear conscience before God and everyone else."

"I have returned to Jerusalem after being away for many years with a money gift to help my people and to offer sacrifices to God. Those accusing me saw that I was in the Temple completing a purification ritual. There was no one standing around me and no fights broke out. There were some Jews from Asia there and they should be here if they have any charges against me.

"You should ask these men if you dare what the Jewish high council say I have not done wrong, except for one thing 'I am on trial before you because I believe in the resurrection of the dead'"

Felix had been around for a number of years, and has been among the Romans who would talk constantly about the Christians. He also knew those who follow The Way wouldn't be found starting riots. He wanted to

wait until Lysias arrived before he would decide what to do. He shouted for an officer to come over, told him to keep Paul in custody only allow him some freedom to receive friends and family to bring him what he needs.

A few days had gone by and Felix came by bringing his wife Drusilla. They sent for Paul regularly and listened as he spoke to them about faith in Christ Jesus. When Paul came to righteousness, self control and the judgement to come Felix got scared and sent Paul away. *Many people are happy to discuss the Good News with you as long as it doesn't touch their lives personally. Like Herod Antipas in Mark 6:17 Felix had taken another mans wife.*

“When it is more convenient I will send for you again.”

He also wanted Paul to influence him so he had Paul sent for a lot. This happened for two years until Felix lost his job as governor and was replaced by Porcius Festas. By keeping Paul captive he helped to keep the peace with the Jews. Felix wanted to keep the Jews happy so on leaving he left Paul in prison.

Chapter 25

Festus was taken away from his new job three days after he had arrived and he headed for Jerusalem. He was met by some Jewish leaders and priest who bought to him their accusations against Paul.

“Could you please have Paul bought here?” they asked him. They were still thinking about how they would kill him. They had planned to ambush him before he arrived in Jerusalem. Festus replied “Paul’s staying put in Caesarea and I will be returning shortly to pick up where I left off. You may come with me to make your accusations known.

He returned just after a week to Caesarea tired and exhausted. They spent that day getting settled into their new lodgings. The next day Paul’s trial began. When Paul was bought into the court room the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem were already there bringing all their false accusations against Paul which they had no way of proving.

Paul stood firm and denied these charges, “I am not guilty, I have done no crime which is against the Jewish law or the temple or the Roman government.”

Then Festus who wanted to keep the peace with the Jews asked Paul, “Will you be willing to be transferred to Jerusalem and to stand trial before me there?” Paul in his reply said “No. This is the official Roman court and I should be tried here. You know I have committed no crime. If I have committed anything worthy of the death penalty I am willing to die. If I am innocent which indeed I am then neither you nor anyone else has the right to hand me over to these men who want me dead. I want to appeal before Caesar.”

Paul knew he had to get to Rome and figured it would be better to arrive there in chains than not get there at all.

Festus turned to his advisers and discussed the situation with them, then he turned again to Paul saying “Very well! You have appealed to Caesar you shall go to Caesar.”

A day or two later Festus had a visit from King Herod Agrippa II the son of Herod Agrippa I. He came with his sister Bernice. While they stayed Festus took the opportunity to tell them about Paul’s case.

“There is a person who is being held captive in one of the prison cells. Felix, the governor before me left his case. While I was walking the streets of Jerusalem some leading priests and other Jewish leaders came to me with their accusations against that man and they wanted me to sentence him. But of course I told them that it is not stated in Roman law to convict a man before giving him an opportunity to speak for himself.

“When they arrived here I allowed them time to settle in their new lodgings and I ordered the case to begin the very next day. I had Paul

brought in, chains and all. I got a surprise because the accusations were not at all what I expected. They say it was something to do with their religion and about a man called Jesus who supposedly died but whom Paul says is alive. I was a bit puzzled as to how I should carry out this kind of investigation. Paul wants to see Caesar, so I had him taken back to the prison cell until I can make some arrangements to get him to Caesar.”

“I would like to hear what this man Paul says,” Agrippa said. “You shall, in the morning,” Festus replied. In the morning Agrippa arrived with his sister Bernice at the big meeting place followed by a crowd of men from the city. Paul was ordered in and Festus walked over to the stage hands hanging down his side, he addressed the crowd saying, “King Agrippa and all who are present this is the man who the local Jews and those in the city of Jerusalem want dead, but I can’t see that he has done anything to deserve the death penalty. He has appealed his case before the emperor and I thought I had better give him a chance so I sent him. I struggled to find the words to use in my letter to the emperor, for to me there is no real charge to put against him. That is why I have had him brought here before all of you, so that after we have all looked him over I might find the right words to write.”

Chapter 26

Then came Paul's chance to speak his defence, the king looked at him with sharp eyes and said in a rough voice. "Lets hear what you have to say."

Paul started his defence by saying how lucky he was to have King Agrippa of all people hearing him make his defence against all these false accusations the Jewish leaders had made.

"I know you have an expert view on the Jewish customs and controversies, please be patient and listen.

"I was raised up by Jewish parents so I have become well accustomed to the Jewish way of living. The leaders know I was a member of the strictest religious group, the Pharisees. I am here now on trial all because I am looking forward to the promises being fulfilled that God made to our ancestor. That is why God is worshiped night and day by the twelve tribes of Israel. They share the same hope as I have yet they don't think I should have this hope. Why does it seem incredible to any of you that the dead can be raised by God?"

"I used to be a not very nice person to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. I was the one who threw many of his believers in jail. I was doing everything I could to make them curse Jesus.

"I was on a mission to do just this in Damascus when I stopped dead still on the dirt track, my friends and I saw a bright light shining down from heaven like none other. I couldn't feel my legs and they seemed to give way under me and I was on the ground. Your majesty I heard a voice saying 'Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me. It is extremely difficult for you to fight against my will.'

"Terrified I asked, 'Who are you sir?' And the Lord answered me saying, 'It is I Jesus the one you have been persecuting. Stand up for I have made myself known to you and has appointed you as my servant and my witness. I want you to go into all the world, tell people everywhere about this experience and the other times. I will keep you safe from your own people and the Gentiles. The Gentiles have a right in God's inheritance and I have chosen you to go to them. I want them to stop walking with their eyes shut and walk in the light, to turn their ways from Satan and to turn back to God. They will receive forgiveness for their sins.'

"King Agrippa, I was obedient to that vision, I continued on my journey and spoke first in Damascus then Jerusalem and all Judah. I also bought the message to the Gentiles saying that everyone must turn from their sins and turn to God. While I was in the temple preaching I got arrested by the Jews, there was a big gang of them and they wanted me dead but I was protected by God and am still alive to tell what God has done in my life. I only teach what the prophets from long ago said would happen, the messiah would suffer on our behalf and he would be the first to rise as a light to the Jews and Gentiles."

Then all of a sudden Festus jumped to his feet and proclaimed that Paul was insane, he was talking unbelievable facts. “This studying has made you crazy.”

Paul risked his life to bring the message. What he said was offensive to the Jews and unbelievable to the Gentiles. It must have seemed strange to a materialistic mind that he should risk so much to gain so little.

“I am not insane,” Paul stood up for himself. “Your excellency, I am telling the truth. I understand that King Agrippa is well acquainted with these things, and I am sure he knows about these events for he has got eyes to see, they weren’t done under cover or in secret.”

He looked at King Agrippa and asked him if he believed the prophets and he answered himself before King Agrippa could answer, “I know you do.”

Paul was interrupted while he was speaking. Agrippa asked him if he could make him a Christian quickly.

Paul answered him, “Quickly or not as the case may be I pray longingly that everyone here in this audience including you Agrippa will become the same as me apart from these chains that bound me.”

There was a blanket of silence that filled the building and everyone raised to their feet and headed for the door. As they were talking amongst themselves King Agrippa and the governor and his sister Bernice came to the conclusion that Paul had done nothing deserving death or imprisonment.

Agrippa turned to face Festus and said, “He could have been set free but he has already appealed to Caesar.”

Chapter 27

When the time came we boarded a ship and were on our way to Italy. Luke joined Paul at this moment. There were many prisoners including Paul who had been placed in the custody of an army Officer named Julius. Our good friend Aristarchus is also travelling with us. They boarded a ship which came from Adramyttium. It stopped at several ports along the way.

When we arrived at Sidon the next day, Julius the Roman officer who was in charge of all the prisoners showed kindness to Paul and allowed him ashore so his friends could provide for his needs. When we set sail again we found the wind was blowing towards us which made it very difficult to control the ship. We sailed just north of Cyprus passing between the Island and the mainland. We sailed along the coast of Gilicia and Pamphylia. When we came to Myra in the area of Lycia the officer in charge got us all to board a ship for Italy.

The weather has been awful these last few days and sailing has been rough. With a lot of hard work and great difficulty we finally came close to Criudus. The wind was blowing the opposite direction and it was a struggle but we managed with difficulty to arrive at Fair Havens which isn't far from the city of Lasea. *Sailing in bad weather could be very dangerous, it was doubtful round about September and impossible when November came. This event took place round about October.*

Paul was concern for the safety of everyone on board so he spoke to the officer in charge.

He spoke openly "Sir, I have reason to believe it could be dangerous for us to continue in this storm, lives may be lost and many injuries conflicted upon us." The Officer told Paul to be quiet and that he would only listen to the ships captain and owner.

Fair Havens was not a very good place to spend the winter so we sailed further up the coast to Phoenix.

The sailors saw it was a gentle wind and decided to pull up anchor and sail, but there was a sudden change in the weather. A strong wind began to take the ship to sea. They found it hard work to steer so they gave up.

We sailed past Cauda, a small Island where we boarded the life boat that was bopping up and down on the waves behind us. We had to tie the wooden planks down to make the main body of the ship stronger. The sailors were scared that the wind would blow us across the sand bars of Syrtis just off the African coast, we lowered the anchor and because of this we were driven before the wind.

The next day the winds started to get stronger and the ship was starting to fall. The sailors were scared we might crash against the rocks so they lowered four of the anchors and prayed for daylight so they could

continue. The sailors wanted to abandon the ship so they prepared a small life boat and lowered it down to the water. Paul saw what they were trying to do and he said to the commanding officer, “You will all lose your lives unless the sailors stay on board.” This time they listened and didn’t want to take such chances, the ropes were cut and the boat fell down.

Once it started to get light in the morning Paul encouraged the sailors to eat something to keep their strength up. They hadn’t eaten anything for a fortnight. “Please eat something it’s for your own good, don’t worry for I tell you the truth not a hair on your heads will perish.”

He stood up where he was and took some bread, breaking it, he gave thanks to God and ate some. Then everyone else on board was encouraged and started to eat as well.

After they had their fill of food the crew needed to lightened the ship more and threw the wheat overboard.

When the sun came out the next day the sailors saw a beach ahead and wondered whether they could get to it, avoiding the rocks round about so they cut the anchors off and lowered the rudders and headed for shore. The water was too shallow and the ship became stuck.

The soldiers were scared that the prisoners would escape and wanted to kill them to prevent that from happening. The commanding Officer took a liking to Paul and wouldn’t allow them to carry out their plan. *God was with Paul and allowed everyone to get to land safely.* The commander gave this order, “All those who are able to swim jump overboard, those who can’t try floating on the debris.” There were planks of wood that were scattered in the water near the ship.

Chapter 28

When they were all safely on shore they found out from the Islanders that they were on the Island of Malta. The people on the island showed kindness and welcomed them warmly. It was cold and raining quite heavy. They gathered some wood together and built a fire. Paul made himself at home and helped the Islanders gather wood for the fire, as he was doing this a poisonous snake wrapped itself on to his hand. The Islanders saw the snake attached to Paul and started talking amongst themselves saying things like this, “This man is a murderer, even though he escaped the waters justice will not allow him to live.” God wasn’t finished with Paul and so kept him alive. Paul shook the snake off and it burnt in the fire. *The poisonous snake was unable to harm Paul.*

The Islanders saw what happened and expected Paul to drop to floor and were amazed when he carried on as if nothing had happened. They believed in lots of different gods and decided Paul was a god.

When Paul and all those on board went ashore, they were near the property of Publius, the island’s chief official. He welcomed them warmly and gave them food to eat and a place to rest. At this moment Publius’s father wasn’t well, he had a high fever.

“Where is he? Take me to him.” Paul asked. Publius showed him into an upstairs room where he was lying in bed. He walked over to the man, prayed for him and after laying hands on him, the man sat up and started being his usual self, he was healed. When the Islanders saw what had happened they started to bring other sick people to him and he healed them all. *Is it any wonder why the Good News is spreading like wild fire.* When it was time to move on the Islanders loaded the ship with all sorts of things they might need for their trip.

Three months had past since the shipwreck. They had to find another ship that had survived the winter, it was an Alexandrian ship. They came to Syracuse where they found lodging for three days before moving on. We then sailed to Rhegium in Italy, soon there was a south wind which started blowing and the next day they sailed along the coast and came to Puteoli. Where there was a small group of believers who asked them to stay for a while. After all these stops they eventually arrived in Rome their final destination.

There was a great number of believers in Rome eager to welcome them. They had heard Paul and his companions were coming from his letter he wrote. They all came to The Three Taverns just outside of Rome to encourage Paul and his friends.

Paul was still under house arrest but in Rome he was allowed his own private lodgings.

When Paul had time to settle in to his new apartment he called a gathering of the local Jewish leaders. He began with an introduction. “Brothers I

was arrested in Jerusalem only to be handed over to the Roman government, but I tell you I have done nothing against our people. I went on trial before the Romans and they wanted to release me. They couldn't find anything on me that deserved the death penalty. The Jewish leaders didn't like the decision and felt it right to appeal to Caeser. I do not wish to press charges against my own people.

“I asked you to come here so we can get to know each other and to tell you that I am in these chains that you see because I believe the Hope of Israel, the Christ has already come.”

“We have heard nothing said against you,” they replied. “We have received no letters, reports nothing from anyone. We come here to listen to what you believe.” These Christians were denounced everywhere. *They were seen as threats to the Romans because they believed in just one God while Romans had several Gods. Paul was eager to arrive in Rome though he wanted to be chain free. We can't always have what we want.*

He arranged a day and invited lots of people to his apartment. He used the books from the Old Testament to tell them about Jesus and the kingdom of God. People would come from miles around to listen to Paul. He would begin first thing in the morning and go on into the evening. There were some that believed and others thought he was off his rocker and didn't believe.

They argued amongst themselves, saying things like, “How can anyone come back to life.” “This Paul doesn't know what he's talking about.” And they left after this final word from Paul. “The Holy Spirit was right when he said to our brothers and sisters through the prophet Isaiah

“Go and say to my people
You will hear my words but will not comprehend.
You will see the things I do but will not perceive its meaning.
These hearts of my people have become hardened.
Their ears have been closed so they can not hear.
Their eyes have been closed so they can not see.
Their ears can not hear.
Their hearts are wounded and can not understand.
And they can not turn to me
And be healed.

I want you to know that this Salvation from God is also for the Gentiles. For what seemed like two years Paul lived as a prisoner in his own house. He welcomed those that took time off to visit him. He wrote letters to those he was unable to see, proclaiming the kingdom of God and telling them about the Lord Jesus Christ. No one tried to stop him. This is how the first Church was formed all those years ago and how the Good News really did spread like wild fire.